

桜庭一樹

Karakura

GOSICKII

—ゴシック— 青い薔薇の下で

角川ビーンズ文庫



Gosick - Volume 03 Chapter 00-03

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through the looking glass

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room.

Lewis Carroll, “[Through the Looking-Glass](#)”

prologue — through the looking glass

It was nighttime.

The starry sky was a square hanging suspended in the air, a painted backdrop on a stage.

A palace of glass and coal-black iron, a cavernous train station, and soot-stained brick buildings lined the street like an elaborate diorama, shimmering under the pale moonlight.

On one of those street corners stood a lone girl.

Her long sandy hair draped down her back, casting a shadow over the jewel-like twinkle in her deep violet eyes. A flood of lights intense enough to tear a hole in the night spilled out to the street, where she stood transfixed.

A thin pane of glass separated her from the blinding spotlights, and under them was a slender mannequin, looking down upon her.

The girl’s dress was threadbare and out of style, and there were holes in her leather shoes. These had once been beautifully made, but they had been worn long past their intended lifetime.

The mannequin wore a glittering dress and a hat, and from its wrist hung a bead-embroidered handbag.

The girl let out a sweet sigh.

Oh... How marvelous!

The mannequin parted its lips in reply.

Marvelous...?

Startled, the girl looked at the mannequin's mouth. It was smiling.

Do come in. You can try one on, too.

"But..."

Try one on in the fitting room. All you have to do is go inside. You don't need to pay.

"...Really?"

The mannequin smiled.

But of course.

The girl slowly entered the building. She was handed a dress from one of the lavish displays, and she stumbled forward in a daze, unable to tell whether this was dream or reality. The door to the fitting room slowly opened, and like a sleepwalker, on she walked, clutching the dress.

She entered the room.

The door slowly closed behind her.

On she walked.

Her sandy hair swayed.

There was a mirror at the back of the fitting room. The girl saw a reflection of herself in her shabby dress. On she walked. The mirror seemed to ripple like water, swallowing up the girl as she moved toward it....

At last, an attendant in a purple uniform opened the door to the

fitting room.

It was empty—all but for a dress.

The attendant slowly picked it up, smiling thinly.

It was nighttime.

Outside, the starry sky was a square hanging suspended in the air, nothing more than a painted backdrop on a stage.

one

chapter one — the magic ring

[1]

Summer had almost begun. Even in late afternoon, the sun was still beating down fiercely. On the village road, horses pulling a wagon trotted along, kicking up one cloud of dust after another.

The wagon left the bittersweet scent of hay in its wake, a tangible premonition of summer's arrival. Kazuya Kujou was racing the other way down the village road to St. Marguerite's School, but when he encountered that scent, he had to stop and look back, squinting his eyes against the brilliance of the sun.

The large, decrepit wagon disappeared further and further off into the distance, rocking wildly from side to side on the bumpy road. A few clumps of hay scattered to the ground with each jolt. On both sides of the road, vineyards stretched out across the rolling hills. Whenever the wind blew, the bright green ivies quivered all at once.

Kazuya started walking again, this time at a leisurely pace. He remembered that he still had a lot of time left until the school gates closed at curfew, and there was no need to be in such a hurry.

He was small and on the slender side for a boy. His short black hair had grown out slightly, and now half-covered his jet-black eyes. He wore the uniform of the famed St. Marguerite's School, whose campus occupied a vast space at the foot of the Alps. His hat sat firmly upon his head as dictated by etiquette, and he carried a brown package in one hand.

As he strolled along, Kazuya opened the seal of the package and took out a letter with his other hand. Without stopping, he happily scanned the contents of the letter.

But soon enough, his face turned rueful.

Dear Kazuya-sama,

How are you? It's your big sis. Hey, listen to this! Daddy's being mean to me. And your brothers are, too. Just how mean, you might ask....

Kazuya turned page after page of the letter as he walked. It took ten pages for her to explain “just how mean” their family was being to her. Meanwhile, he had traveled most of the way down the village road, and could already see the school gates in the distance.

While he was absorbed in his reading, a clattering wagon sped right by him. He jumped at the sensation of air rushing against his cheek.

The letter came from his sister, who was two years his senior. Outwardly, his seventeen-year-old sister looked as delicate as a wildflower fluttering in the wind, but in fact, she had a strong backbone. Although she was generally demure, she had a personality that allowed her to say what she wanted without mincing words, and that sometimes led to conflicts with their father and brothers. Kazuya privately thought that his sister with her strong disposition had far more in common with their father than he ever did.

Since she was about to graduate from her girls' school later in the year, their father had urged her to find a “square-faced imperial soldier ten years older than her” to marry. But rather than let herself be married off who knows where, she had decided to become a teacher at the school she attended. And so she and their father and brothers had butted heads over this disagreement for days and nights on end.

Kazuya-san, you absolutely have to take my side.

When Kazuya came to the eleventh page and read this line, he thanked his lucky stars that he was currently in Sauvure. As the youngest of the family, he was by nature far too quiet to jump into the fray between his sister and the others. And as for his mother, she had a way of promptly taking whatever position was most advantageous to herself while hiding behind a smile. She was a gentle and graceful woman, and yet she was also utterly unreliable.

Kazuya was still in the middle of reading the letter when he arrived

at the main gate of St. Marguerite's School. The iron fence, so tall that it was dizzying to lay eyes on, was elaborately wrought into an arabesque pattern that glimmered with a few hints of gold ornamentation. Without lifting his eyes from the letter, he slipped through the gate and onto the school grounds.

The letter suddenly turned into a list of unfamiliar items.

I want three white cotton blouses, with cute collars on them. And a tartan collar, too. And leather shoes in dark brown with decorated tips. Embroidered socks, and a glass pen. Don't forget the ink. Hmm, what else...

Apparently, she was asking Kazuya to send her some things from Sauvure that she would need for her work as a schoolteacher. And her shopping list was just getting started.

Bewildered, Kazuya came to a stop. He had no idea where or how to buy the things that his sister had in her list, much less what they even were.

He sighed heavily and looked up to the sky. At that moment...

"Look, it's that boy! He's the culprit. See, that's the one I was telling you about!"

When Kazuya heard the words "he's the culprit," he turned around in surprise. It was already second nature to him by now, but whenever he happened across a mysterious crime or anything even slightly odd, he would quickly formulate a concise synopsis and run up a maze of stairs to deliver it to his beautiful but strange friend, who constantly assailed him with petulant cries of...

I'm bored! Bring me a mystery!

However, Kazuya recognized the voice yelling about the "culprit"—it belonged to his teacher, Miss Cécile. She was a woman who wore large round glasses and shoulder-length brunette hair that puffed out in the wind, and resembled a chubby puppy.

For some reason, Miss Cécile was pointing directly at Kazuya.

“...The culprit?” Kazuya turned around.

A breeze hissed past.

There was no one there.

He again looked at Cécile. As he thought, she was pointing in his direction.

Kazuya stared, mystified, at Cécile and her finger.

Then, at Cécile’s feet, the branches of the hedge started to stir. The rustling movement was so much like that of a large animal hiding in the bushes that Kazuya instinctively backed away from it.

A head popped out of the hedge. It belonged to a thickly-bearded, burly old man holding a large pair of gardening shears.

Still pointing at Kazuya, Cécile said, “Excuse me, mister! This boy is the culprit. He trampled on the violets and opened a hole in the hedge.”

“Ack!” Kazuya cried out. Just a few weeks before, he’d been forced to leave campus at a time long after curfew, and had exited through a hole in the hedge. Cécile had found out, and saw to it that Kazuya received a sound scolding.

This was presumably the gardener who had been asked to repair the hole. His sun-baked, leathery face twisted into a scowl, and he glared at Kazuya. “Well, well. So you’re the one who made a hole in the hedge! Do you have any idea how much work I’ve put into tending these plants? Get over here so I can snip off those naughty arms of yours!”

Anticipating that Kazuya would try to escape, the gardener waved his huge shears through the air to threaten him.

But Kazuya only paled and quickly bowed his head. “I’m sorry!”

The gardener was taken by surprise, and he stared down blankly at the back of Kazuya’s head. At last, he chuckled. “All right. Cécile must’ve bawled you out enough already. Just forget it.”

And with this, he rustled through the branches back into the hedge. Cécile giggled.

Just as Kazuya began to walk away, a thought occurred to him, and he returned. “Excuse me, Miss Cécile. I have a bit of a question....”

“Oh, what about?”

“Well...” Kazuya pointed at the letter he was holding. “Have you ever heard of a ‘blue rose’?”

The year was 1924 in the Kingdom of Sauvure, a small European country.

The Gulf of Lyon, known as a summer resort for the aristocracy, served as an elegant entrance on the Mediterranean Sea to this long and narrow land. From there it extended like a secret corridor up to the Alpine highlands in the interior of the European continent. In the heart of the mountains lay the boundary with Switzerland; the line with Italy was demarcated through picturesque countryside near the ocean; and the inland capital surrounding the royal palace abutted the French border. Despite standing in the midst of world powers, Sauvure boasted of an illustrious history that reached back to antiquity, and had survived the destruction of the Great War, earning it the nickname of the “Little Giant” of Western Europe.

In the foothills of the secret corridor that led to the Alps stood St. Marguerite’s School, which also bore a long and distinguished history, if not quite to the degree that the kingdom itself did. The school was known far and wide in the kingdom as the premier educational institution for the children of the aristocracy. The campus had been painstakingly constructed in the midst of a serene natural environment. The stately school building, built in the shape of a U if seen from the air, towered over vast gardens bursting with greenery, surrounded by a tall hedge. The school adhered to a strict policy of secrecy that decreed students and staff as the only ones allowed in or out.

But after the conclusion of the war that would someday be known

as World War One, St. Marguerite's School began to accept worthy students from select allied countries.

Among them was fifteen-year-old Kazuya Kujou. His grades were excellent, and his moral conduct impeccable. Given the fact that his father was a soldier of the empire, and that he had two older brothers who were naturally also successful, he received a recommendation to study abroad at St. Marguerite's. But although Kazuya arrived bursting with expectations for his new life, what awaited him was only prejudice from the children of the nobility, linguistic and cultural barriers, and a craze for ghost stories that inexplicably raged all over campus....

And then he met Victorique de Blois: a girl who was beautiful, but odd, and in some ways cruel...

In the several months since he had begun his studies, Kazuya had gone through many strange trials, but now he was finally starting to feel more comfortable with his life in Sauvure.

"...A 'blue rose'?" answered Cécile, cocking her head slightly.

Kazuya nodded. He sat down with his teacher on a wooden bench in the school gardens.

The campus contained the huge, U-shaped main building, luxurious student dormitories, a library, and a chapel. And filling the spaces between the paths that connected one building to another were enchantingly intricate gardens, replete with manicured flower beds, fountains, and inviting lawns.

As they sat on a bench strategically placed in a corner of the lawn, Kazuya showed Cécile the letter he had received. "My sister wants me to send her a bunch of stuff, like clothes, shoes, and stationary. But there's this one thing on her list..."

At the end of her letter, she had written: *And a blue rose, too. I'm counting on you!* Kazuya didn't have the foggiest notion what that meant, but what if...

“I wondered if this is one of those things only women know about.”

“Oh, Kujou, you didn’t know?”

Kazuya realized that Cécile was giving him an appalled look. He stammered, “N-no, I don’t. Huh? Is it that well-known?”

“I guess boys wouldn’t know much about these things.”

“I’m sorry...?” Kazuya had gotten into the habit of apologizing automatically thanks to his conversations with Victorique and Avril. Not that he believed for one second that he was at fault.

“The ‘Blue Rose’ is one of the biggest blue diamonds in the world.”

“A diamond...?”

“Yeah. About *thiiii*s big. It’s shaped like a rose, so they named it the ‘Blue Rose’ after the crest of the royal house of Sauvure, which is a big, light blue rose. It was the treasure of the royal family. Remember, there should be a picture of it in one of your textbooks.”

Kazuya recalled a photograph of a blue diamond in his fine arts textbook, and nodded. But a few moments later, his face turned doubtful. “If I were to send that to my sister, it’d cause an international incident.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Oh, Kujou. No, what your big sister is talking about is a glass replica that looks exactly like the Blue Rose. It’s a paperweight. Right now, it’s very popular among women. If I remember correctly, you can only buy it at Jeantan.”

“‘Jeantan’?”

“It’s a big department store in Sauvrière.”

Kazuya frowned. Sauvrière was the capital of Sauvure. It was a city on the plains bordering France, far away from the village where St. Marguerite’s School was located. He had once passed through the capital after first arriving in Sauvure, but since then he’d had no reason to travel to such a distant place.

“...I see. So I'll have to buy it in Sauvrière.”

Cécile regarded him curiously. “Can't you just tell her it's too far for you?”

“Hmm. But I think she might be really looking forward to it,” Kazuya replied soberly.

Cécile stared at his face for a moment, then at last reached out her hand and began to stroke his hair.

“I, I, I beg your pardon!?”

“You're such a nice little brother!”

“S-stop it!” Kazuya ducked away from her. “Anyway ... for a moment there, I was really shocked. Because if you're talking about that Blue Rose, I thought she might have meant the real thing.”

“Oh, no. But, you know, the real blue diamond isn't around anymore.”

“It isn't?”

“In all the turbulence of the war, it disappeared from the royal treasury. There were a lot of other works of art that disappeared during the war, too. By now I'm sure they've already been taken out of the country and put on display in the mansion of some collector in the New World, even though they were part of Sauvure's precious heritage....” Cécile murmured a little sadly. “The Blue Rose was cherished as a symbol of the country because it looked so much like the royal family crest. The diamond had been placed inside of the king's throne for many generations, and losing it was said to be a huge blow to the royal family. There's also a story about it that has to do with a beautiful former queen. That's one reason why the girls in this country love it so much. And it's a pretty color, and in a cute shape like a flower.... So it's a great pity. I wonder where it could be right now....”

She stood up and started to walk away, then turned back. “Oh, yes, Kujou!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“If you’re going to Jeantan to get a Blue Rose...”

“Yes, I know. I have to file the application for weekend leave, and be sure to go through the main entrance during daylight hours—”

“Buy one for me too.”

“...Huh?”

“I’ve always wanted one,” she continued jovially. “But it’s so much trouble to go all the way to Sauvrière.”

“Um, Miss Cécile... I don’t appreciate being made into an errand—”

“Please? And don’t skip your homework.” Cécile pretended not to hear Kazuya’s complaints, and walked away with a smile.

Kazuya felt vaguely stunned. “Why does it feel like ever since I came to Sauvure, women have been... Why is this happening? Are they looking down on me? I ought to put my foot down. Yes, at least once, put my foot down, upon my honor as a man...”

“...Kujou, buy one for me too!”

“Aaaah!” Kazuya shrieked and jumped up from the bench. Quavering, he turned around, and saw the familiar face of a girl appear from out of nowhere behind the bench.

She had short blond hair that shimmered under the sunlight, large blue eyes that always sparkled with life, and long slim legs—as if health and vivacity themselves had assumed physical shape as a young girl.

This was Avril Bradley, a foreign student from England. She had joined Kazuya’s class three months ago, and befriended him when they were both involved in the Case of the Purple Book.

For some reason, she was lounging on her elbows and knees on the lawn. Her skirt had hiked up a little over her long legs, which were robust despite their slimness, as they stretched out innocently

across the grass.

Kazuya blushed slightly. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“Buy one for me too, Kujou.”

“Um...?”

“A Blue Rose paperweight.”

Kazuya sighed, and sat back down on the bench.

Avril poked her head out from behind him, her face wreathed in smiles.

“How long have you been there, Avril?”

“I was rolling around on the grass over there. The weather’s so nice and comfortable now that summer’s almost here.”

“Huh.”

“And then you and Miss Cécile came by. You two seemed to be having such a good time that I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“What good time?! The gardener threatened me with his shears, and then Miss Cécile sent me to do her shopping!”

“Ha, ha, ha! Kujou, you’re such a weakling.”

She said this lightly, but Kazuya found her words deeply hurtful. Stubbornly trying to keep his composure, he turned away from her. He felt a slap on his shoulder, and sullenly looked back at her, only to run his cheek right into her waiting index finger.

“Ha, ha, ha! You fell for it, you fell for it!” Avril crowed gleefully.

“...Avril, what the heck were you doing on the lawn?”

“Oh, right.” Avril withdrew her finger from Kazuya’s cheek and stood up. As nimbly as ever, she ran out to the lawn, skirt flying, and came back hugging something protectively to her chest. “Look, look!” She sat down beside Kazuya. “Ta-dah!”

It was a book, with lots of pictures and large print ... obviously, a children's book. But Avril showed it to him very proudly.

"I ordered it from the village bookshop. Yesterday it finally came, so I stayed up all night reading it. Now I'm suffering from a lack of sleep. See how red my eyes are?" She pulled down her lower eyelid with a fingertip. But this was the ever-healthy Avril; she may have claimed sleep deprivation, but she certainly didn't show any signs of it.

Kazuya took the book from her. The title was simply "Ghost Stories." He immediately tried to hand it back.

Avril clasped both of her hands behind her back and refused to accept it. "Come on, it's fun! You should read it, too!"

"I've already told you that I'm not interested in this sort of thing. Besides, isn't this a children's book?"

"Really? But I thought it was rather advanced." Avril took the book from Kazuya and opened to a page. "There was this noblewoman who went inside a department store dressing room. But when the attendant opened the door, there was nothing but a bloody severed head inside! Aaaaah!"

"...I'm not falling for that one anymore."

"How about this one: a little girl in a pretty dress was crying, and anyone who talked to her, thinking she was an orphan, would disappear. They turned a corner and vanished, leaving only their clothes behind ... because they were pulled down to hell by a spirit taking the form of a little girl!"

Kazuya tuned out Avril's voice and turned his attention to the package he had received from his sister.

Huh...? He had been thinking that it felt a little too heavy to just contain a letter, but apparently something else was inside. He spied a glimpse of light blue fabric.

"Then there's this bloodthirsty murderer who dresses like a vagabond. She hangs the corpses of countless children beneath

layers of old clothes. Actually, she's a wicked devil worshiper who practices rituals that came from some colonial land. The husks of dead children jiggle underneath her clothes with every step she takes! Hey, what's that?"

"Uh, nothing... This came in the package..." Kazuya took out the turquoise-blue cloth. When he unfolded it, he had to sigh in admiration. Avril gasped from beside him.

The cloth was made of silk. The sight of it jogged something in Kazuya's memory. It was a small, elegant turquoise-blue kimono, decorated with delicate white brushstrokes that traced the shapes of fresh lilies floating on water.

It was his sister's finest and most cherished kimono from when she was a child.

A short note slipped down into Kazuya's lap, and he picked it up.

A little present in exchange for your shopping. Kazuya-san, you wrote before that you made friends with a little girl, right? Do give this to her, pretty please.

—your big sis.

Friends with a little girl...?

Kazuya narrowed his eyes.

Indeed, he had written to his family previously about his new friend. But friends with a little girl...

Apparently, his sister had the mistaken impression that this actually referred to a small ... child. The kimono was certainly gorgeous enough to evoke a sigh from him and take Avril's breath away, but it was child-sized.

And Victorique's the same age as me...

However, the more Kazuya thought about it, he realized that it might just be perfect for Victorique's undersized body. Because other than her bizarrely huge brain that could outmatch several adults put together, she herself was as small as a child. Take away

the heaps of lace and frills, and there really wasn't much left at all.

Kazuya smiled, and jumped up in excitement, eager to show this kimono to Victorique.

"Huh? Kujou?" Avril called out curiously in response to Kazuya's abrupt departure. She tried to get up to follow him, but she was still too drowsy, and lolled back down on the bench, where she watched Kazuya fade into the distance.

"I guess he's going over there again ... Auntie Avril knows that much," Avril murmured softly to herself. She sleepily rubbed her blue eyes, then slowly closed them. "Because he always goes there in the end..."

The pages of the child's picture book in her hands flapped in the early summer breeze....

two

Deep within the expanses of the school, looming imposingly from a high perch in the rolling hills, stood St. Marguerite's Library, a palace of knowledge renowned throughout Europe for over three hundred years. Centuries of exposure to the elements had taken their toll on the hollow stone of the tower that gazed down upon the vast campus like a wordless giant.

The tower's exterior was featureless to the point that Kazuya had some trouble locating the entrance. But soon enough, a leather-covered door pounded through with round brass tacks came into view. And when he gently turned the knob to open it...

...He stepped into an atrium that soared all the way up to a vertigo-inducing ceiling. Bookshelves covered every wall. Who could count the myriads of volumes they contained? Thick, leather-bound books jostled for space on the shelves.

When Kazuya looked up, he saw the distant image of the solemn religious fresco painted on the ceiling. But what leapt out to his eyes above all was the peculiar form of the narrow wooden staircase.

The labyrinthine staircase...

According to legend, during the construction of the tower in the early seventeenth century, the king of Sauvure had included strict specifications for a sky-scraping labyrinth. The king was dreadfully henpecked, and when he could not find a suitable location for his secret trysts with his beautiful young lover, he had a small room built at the very top of the tower. And so that no one but the two of them would be able to find their way to the top, the staircase was to be built in the form of a maze.

Of course, by the present time, it had already undergone renovations, and a hydraulic elevator had been installed at the back of the atrium. However, that elevator was reserved for the use of staff, and a certain "special" student.

And that special student was once again at the top of the library, abandoning herself to her books, her long blond hair dangling down like Rapunzel, the same way she spent every day.

That room at the very top, once a boudoir for the king to abandon himself to his lover, had been completely remodeled into a small and cozy conservatory. Tropical trees and large, gaudily-colored flowers basked in the intense sunlight that streamed in from the skylights above.

In between the garden and the top landing of the labyrinthine staircase, someone had left an exquisite porcelain doll sprawled across the floor.

The doll, close to life-sized at a height of one hundred and forty centimeters, wore an aqua-blue satin dress, the top layered with rows of fine black lace like a chic flower bouquet. Floral-patterned boots encased her tiny feet, and her splendid mane of long golden hair spilled down to the floor like a turban come undone.

An unreadable expression on her profile, she leaned down over her books. Clear emerald-green eyes gazed out hazily, as if fixed on something in the distance. To Kazuya, that face was more beautiful than any he had ever seen, but at the same time, it was also colder than any other.

That porcelain doll—no, that young girl, small and delicate enough to be mistaken for a porcelain doll—was busily puffing away at a ceramic pipe held to her lips.

A thin white wisp of smoke lazily meandered up to the ceiling. From time to time, a passing breeze fluttered the line of smoke aimlessly.

The girl was Victorique de Blois.

The “captive princess” of St. Marguerite’s School.

For reasons unknown to Kazuya, she was not allowed to set foot outside of the school. Perhaps as a form of protest, she also refused to attend classes, and whiled away her days reading in this

conservatory. She was profoundly lovely, and profoundly mysterious.

As usual, rows of heavy books sat open on the floor, radiating all around her. Smoking her pipe, she read these books with incredible speed.

Like a scene out of some vivid painting, Victorique stretched out her unoccupied hand to turn a page, softly rustling her clothes. Other than the whisper of her resplendent satin dress, there was no other sound—no voices, no noises, nothing at all. Silence dominated the scene, and it felt startlingly unreal, as if she had been sitting like this, reading her books, for centuries on end.

However...

An intruder had now come to obliterate her wonderfully silent tableau.

Sensing a presence, Victorique jerked up her head. It was an animalistic movement. Like a fish feeling the first stirrings of an earthquake. A small animal sniffing out a predator. A migratory bird anticipating the winter.

Her brow knitted slightly.

That same moment, a banging came from far below in the atrium. Someone had opened the door and entered the library.

Victorique felt a questioning gaze drift up to her from the bottom. And then came a small, shy voice...

“Victori-ique? Are you there?”

The voice of a boy.

Victorique frowned slightly. “Of course I’m here,” she whispered back.

Her voice was a strange one—it was husky, more like the voice of

an old woman. Moreover, the light in her eyes was as fathomless as the eyes of one who had lived a very long time, and strangely distant from reality. These, combined with her exquisitely small doll-like body, created an impression of jarring imbalance.

If judging by the echo of rhythmical footsteps, the boy who had entered the atrium, Kazuya Kujou, had apparently begun to climb the maze-like staircase. They advanced at a steady, unfaltering pace, as solemn as the studious boy to whom they belonged.

As Victorique smoked her pipe, she idly listened to the sound of those footsteps.

Tap, tap, tap, tap...

“...Ack!?”

She heard the faint sound of a strange, short cry; perhaps it was more of a scream. Then she heard a furious thumping as something rolled down the stairs. Startled, Victorique leaned over the railing and looked down.

Kazuya was nowhere to be seen. He had apparently lost his footing along the way and fallen down.

“Victorique, help me! ...Wait, what am I saying. Of course you wouldn’t; I know that much. I’ll try to manage on my own, so wait for me!”

Victorique shrugged, then returned to her reading as if nothing had happened.

Several minutes later...

Kazuya finally arrived at the entrance to the conservatory, breathing heavily. As he wiped sweat from his brow, he happily, albeit wearily, walked up to where his tiny friend sat surrounded by rows of books. “I fell on the way up,” he said, plunking himself down in his usual spot next to her. “I’ve climbed that staircase so many times that I let down my guard for a moment. One can never

be too careful. If I fell off those stairs, I'd die for sure."

Victorique snorted disdainfully.

Kazuya smiled briefly, gazing at the frosty expression on his friend's face as she ignored him in favor of her books. A few moments later, he straightened himself up again. "Oh, yes..."

He rose and started busily picking up the candy wrappers and other detritus that Victorique had left on the floor. She tilted her head up slightly to glance at him peevishly, then returned her gaze to her books.

After this, she softly muttered, "A letter from your sister?"

Kazuya stuffed the loose wrappers into the pockets of his uniform. "Yeah. I picked up a letter at the post office. And it's a pretty long one, too... Hmm? Hold on. How did you know that?"

"A wellspring of wisdom. The same way I always know," Victorique replied dismissively. She reached out to turn a page ... then, for some reason, she drew her arm back, and squeezed her hands together. "Nothing is impossible for my overflowing wellspring of wisdom. Even if I'm just sitting here without seeing anything, I still know everything. I am honing my senses by taking in fragments of chaos from this world for my amusement. Yes, I toy with them. I reconstruct the fragments with my wellspring of wisdom, and all that's left is the cold, hard truth. I spend my days enjoying myself in this fashion, and when I am so inclined, I may even undertake the task of articulating the process to a dull and mediocre person like you. But that would be too much trouble, so I'd generally rather stay silent..."

"...Tch!"

"It's a very simple thing, you know. In other words, I can tell you went to the post office because of the package you are holding. If it were a letter from your father or brothers, then you would be dragging yourself here with a pathetic look on your face. But today you are cheerful. Therefore, I know that the letter isn't from them."

“Well, when you put it that way, it does sound rather simple.” Kazuya sighed, and wrapped his arms around his knees. He plucked a candy from the floor, peeled it away from the polka-dotted wrapping, and tossed it into his mouth. The candy was bigger than it first appeared, and while he took time to munch on it, he surreptitiously regarded the face of his small and very eccentric friend.

Victorique de Blois.

This mysterious girl insulted him as mediocre, even though he was a scholar from a Far Eastern island and considered brilliant by all of his teachers. Had any other student called him such things, he naturally would have never stood for it. He had come to Sauvure intending to represent his nation, and his grades and conduct were above reproach.

But despite all this, whenever the tiny Victorique de Blois let loose one of her insults at him—while flying through difficult books one after another despite never attending class—he somehow found himself unable to retort.

Perhaps part of the reason for that stemmed from their first meeting, when she had rescued him by correctly deducing the truth behind a case that had imperiled him. After that, they had experienced several more cases together, and each time, with logic and clarity, she would swiftly articulate the reconstruction of chaos using her wellspring of wisdom.

And yet, in some ways, she could be surprisingly helpless, to the point that she had to grit her teeth in exertion just to lift a single chair.

Although Kazuya was thoroughly astonished at her uncanny intelligence and deeply hurt by her abusive words, he would find himself startled by her weakness, and never failed to lend her a helping hand.

His pride, his common sense, and the hidden feelings of tenderness that lay inside of him—in the few months since he had first met her, all of these things had been taxed to capacity and were on the

verge of burning out. Even now, he vacillated between leaving in a huff over her intolerably brusque attitude or staying with her, while munching on the chunk of candy, simply gazing at her delicate, icy profile...

"I think ghost stories are just a huge form of mass delusion," Victorique suddenly said.

As Kazuya's piece of candy dissolved and he wondered whether to chew the last remnant or suck on it a little more, he looked up at her in surprise. "C-come again?"

"I was contemplating the factor known as the 'ghost story' that has permeated the fabric of this school."

"May I ask why?"

"...Because I'm bored."

Kazuya grimaced.

Victorique popped the pipe out of her mouth and gave him a strangely disapproving glare. Her emerald-green eyes gleamed ominously. "Since you haven't brought me a single mystery from the outside world, I've been completely, utterly bored. Even though I continue to endlessly complain that I am endlessly bored, you haven't brought a single interesting case to me, nor have you had the decency to stir one up yourself."

"If I stirred one up myself, that would make me a criminal. I'd be put on a ship and deported in no time flat. For goodness' sake, you can be really unreasonable..."

"Kujou, this is an order from the princess." Victorique raised her head, quite unconcerned with Kazuya's exasperated reaction. "I give you until tomorrow to get mixed up into some strange case, even if you have to die in the process."

"Why should I? No, thank you!"

“There is nothing to fear. If I’m in the mood, then I’ll solve it for you quickly enough.”

“Heaven help me if you’re not in the mood!” Kazuya turned his back to her.

Victorique snorted disagreeably, and reached out to turn the page of her book. Then she yelped and quickly pulled her hand back. She again squeezed her hands together and worriedly looked at Kazuya, afraid that he had seen her just now.

But Kazuya was still facing the other direction. She breathed a sigh of relief.

And then she languidly stretched, like a cat would, her body lengthening to an unexpected degree. Her blue satin dress and its layers of heavy black lace rustled softly.

“So?”

“Hmm?”

“What about ghost stories?”

“Oh, that.” Victorique completed her stretch, and brought her pipe back up to her lips for a puff. “Do you realize that we are currently in the age of an unprecedented boom in ghost stories? Occult anthologies are flying off the shelves, and mansions rumored to house ghosts are being swamped with tourists.”

“Huh... Well, there is someone in my class who loves those stories. Not that I have any interest in them.”

“Have you noticed that this fad is mainly centered around the cities?”

Kazuya shook his head. “Nope.” But he thought back to the stories he had just heard from Avril earlier, all of them set in an urban department store or on the street, then felt he had an idea of what she meant.

“You know, these things started getting popular at the turn of the

century. Rapid modernization causes the darkness of the world to fade away. When rationally unexplainable phenomena and other curiosities are analyzed according to science, mysteries lose their mystery. However, humans don't live their lives solely based on what they can see and comprehend. Hence, the boom in ghost stories. It all stems from desire, you see."

"From desire...?"

"Yes. That most basic human desire—to be one with the unseeable and unknowable. Some seek it in religion. Because no one has ever seen God. Some seek it in romance. Because love is also intangible. And now others have begun to seek it in ghost stories."

"Religion and love, sure, but including ghost stories is weird."

"The only thing weird around here would be those presents you give me."

"Y-you have a point there. Sorry about that..." Kazuya's shoulders slumped. He glanced at the candy holder sitting on the floor at Victorique's side. It was originally an exotic hat that he had given to her as a gift, but she had rechristened it as a candy holder, and it was now turned upside down and stuffed with candies. And as for the fist-sized golden skull inside of the hat, even now Kazuya couldn't think of any use for it, although he had been the one to bring it here.

Kazuya popped a second piece of candy into his mouth. "I still don't believe in ghost stories. I mean, aren't they all made up? There's nothing in this world that can't be explained with logic. There are plenty of reasons behind everything, just plenty—even for God, even for love. So I'd never believe in the supernatural, no matter what."

"And whenever something happens that can't be explained, people like you are always the first ones to cave in," Victorique declared, snorting contemptuously.

Kazuya frowned. "Th-that's not true..." He fell into an aggrieved silence.

Victorique gazed up at him curiously. “Nothing else to say? Why are you just sitting there looking stupid?”

“...P-pardon me for looking stupid. It’s the face I was born with.”

“So, you’re perfectly confident that you would never fall for it. Then how about a little test? Allow me to prove to you that you’re a fool, a scoundrel, and a beast,” Victorique said, oddly cheerful. And then, in a very unusual gesture, she turned toward Kazuya and faced him head on. Kazuya watched her uncomfortably out of the corner of his eye.

Seeing Victorique from this angle made it clear to him just how astonishingly tiny she really was. She looked more like an exquisite doll that someone had placed on the floor. Even the motion of her hand as she smoked her pipe resembled the slow movement of a marionette. Only those deep green eyes, with their indescribable, arresting radiance, spoke of the conscious will inside of her.

“...What?”

“Look at this, Kujou.”

“Hmm?” Kazuya leaned over.

Victorique promptly presented him with the fist that she had earlier kept clenched. He couldn’t help feeling a little surprised at how small her hand was. Something sparkled on her right fist—a ring. It was inlaid with a dull olive-colored gemstone mounted on a thin golden bezel in the shape of a snake.

“This is a magic ring.”

Kazuya stared at Victorique blankly. Her face was perfectly straight. She didn’t seem to be kidding, but her eyes were smiling. She was definitely up to something.

“It’s a magic ring,” she repeated, in the tone of an insistent child.

Kazuya scratched his head in dismay. “You know, you can be really childish sometimes!”

“Shut up. So, what sort of magic ring is it? It has the power, Kujou, to determine when you are lying.”

“...Victorique, that’s quite enough. There’s no way it can do that.”

“It can tell if you’re lying. Scared yet?”

“O-of course not!”

“Now, prick up those stupid ears of yours and listen carefully. This ring will glow red if you are telling the truth. However, if you tell a lie, it will glow green. That is because it’s a magic ring. You understand, don’t you? Nod your head even if you don’t understand.”

“...Fine.”

“Now, let us begin the questioning.” Victorique gave an exaggerated nod.

Her behavior seemed oddly juvenile in comparison to her usual sagacious demeanor, and it bewildered Kazuya. But since he couldn’t think of any way to extricate himself from the situation, he resigned himself to playing along, and turned to face her. *Just when I thought I’d escaped from Avril’s ghost stories...* He had to sigh.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, but...”

“Kazuya Kujou is a moron.”

“...Now wait a minute!”

“This is where you answer.”

“I’m not a moron,” Kazuya sullenly replied. “I’m just normal. No, maybe a little cleverer than normal.”

“That is a lie.”

“Oh, come on!”

But the look on Victorique's face was so smug that he started to feel uncertain. And then he dropped his gaze to her hand and saw that, incredibly enough...

The ring had turned dark green.

Suspicion furrowed Kazuya's brow. "You just switched the ring without me noticing, didn't you?"

"I did not. If you don't believe me, then keep your eyes on the ring."

"O-okay..." Kazuya looked down at the ring.

Victorique launched into her next question. "Kujou is a womanizer."

"...."

"A lecher."

"...That's going too far."

"You are a bloodthirsty and altogether worthless beast that satisfies its lustful cravings regardless of the time or place."

"That's mean... You don't have to keep piling on like that..."

"Kujou."

"No, ma'am! Oh, for heaven's sake! Wait, what...?"

Kazuya cocked his head. The ring had again turned dark green.

As he held his breath and kept a close watch, Victorique laughed mercilessly. "Like I said, it's a magic ring."

"Very well. I'm a bloodthirsty and altogether worthless beast. So be it. Stupid Victorique..."

"Be quiet. Final question. Kujou, you are dull and mediocre."

"Fine. Yes, I am apparently dull and mediocre."

Victorique held her hand up toward Kazuya, a grin filling her face.

As if in a bad dream, the ring changed color.

To a deep, sinister, blood-red.

Kazuya's mouth dropped open. A dry, early summer wind flowed in from the skylights, ruffling his bangs as he stared at the ring, which gleamed evilly red. The blooming tropical plants and the large, garishly-colored flowers of the conservatory murmured in the breeze.

Suddenly, Victorique turned her back on Kazuya and immersed herself once again into the world of books. Kazuya waited for a minute, but she made no attempt to speak. He was consequently forced to address her tiny back.

“...So?”

No response.

“How does it work? Victorique, you made a big fuss about wanting to show me that ring, so there must be some trick to it, right? Tell me.”

Silence.

“Hey, Victorique. Tell me!”

Victorique lifted her head and looked over her shoulder at him in surprise. “Kujou, you're still there?”

“Yes, I'm still here! And if you're wondering why I'm still here, I've been waiting for you to give me an explanation.”

Victorique stared at Kazuya in bewilderment. “I am reading a book, so could you keep it down, please?”

“Victorique!”

Startled by Kazuya's sudden shout, Victorique's eyes widened, and then her cheeks puffed out in an annoyed pout. "Kujou, you are being ... really loud."

"Because I want to know the answer."

"But I'm already tired of teasing you."

"Y-you are really trying my patience, you know that? Why!?"

"I suppose it's your fault for being so mediocre."

"...Victorique, I'm angry with you. Sometimes it gets really hard for me to take your insults. I end up lying awake at night, wondering if you might actually hate me..."

As Victorique sat facing away from him, her expression shifted slightly. Was she wondering if she had said too much? But the slight change was unseen to Kazuya behind her.

Nevertheless, she wasn't ready to relent. She pursed her lips into a stubborn line and snorted through her dainty little nose. "I am in the middle of reading something, and I would prefer not to be disturbed."

Kazuya lapsed into an aggrieved silence.

The wind gusted again. The brilliant sunshine of early summer poured through the skylights. Victorique's blond hair, like an unfurled velvet turban, sparkled under the sunlight. On the other side of her tiny head, Kazuya could see a white tendril of smoke rise up to the ceiling.

At last, softly and without raising her head, Victorique spoke. "Kujou. Left-hand bookshelves, seventeenth row from the top and exactly twenty books from the left."

"...Yes?"

"It's a book. Just go get it."

Morosely silent, Kazuya rose to his feet. The sound of his

rhythmically echoing footsteps descended the narrow wooden staircase. He retrieved the book from the bookshelves and walked back upstairs.

“Page seven hundred, seventh line from the top,” snapped Victorique.

“...Okay?” Kazuya sat down beside her and began to flip through the pages of the heavy tome.

The subject of the book was rare gemstones. The seventh line of page seven hundred concerned a gemstone known as [alexandrite](#).

As Kazuya read, understanding dawned on him, and he nodded his head.

Alexandrite was a gemstone that turned dark green under artificial light and dark red under natural light, as if by magic. This special property led it to be used by fortune-tellers for divination since the time of the ancients. The book further mentioned that both the devil worshiping cults that had swept through Europe at the end of the last century, and those who had promoted indigenous religions from the colonies, had also used the stone for black magic at some point...

Now Kazuya recalled that when Victorique was trying to frighten him with the stone, she had nonchalantly held her hand up to the sunlight streaming in from the skylights when it changed to dark red. And when it changed to dark green, her hand was facing the bright lamps that lit up the conservatory.

“I get it,” Kazuya said, nodding. “The gemstone on your ring is alexandrite.”

“...You thought it was magic, didn’t you?”

“D-did not! Certainly, I was a little ... no, very alarmed, but still...”

Victorique looked up. Her small face wore a devilish grin. “When I was small, I used to terrorize Gréville with this ring.”

“Inspector de Blois?”

“Yes. For some reason, Gréville used to come every day to silently observe me in the tower where I was imprisoned, and I found that very unsettling. So I would discern information using my wellspring of wisdom, but pretended I had done so with the ring. Gréville was so scared that all he could do was blubber.”

“Now I feel kind of sorry for him...”

Upon hearing Kazuya’s expression of pity, Victorique’s expression tightened slightly, and she leaned over with a deadly serious look in her eyes. “That’s not all. I had a messenger from hell glow in the dark and run around the tower room. Gréville is such a fool; he really seemed to think that I was an actual demon. Then I was finally able to drive him away.”

“A messenger from hell?”

“A glowing rat.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Do you have to pipe up at every little thing, Kujou?!”

Kazuya fumed, and fell silent. Victorique ignored his reaction, and impatiently continued, “Go to page two thousand in the same book, fifth line down.”

“O-okay...?” Kazuya turned to the page.

This section concerned an unusual variety of [fluorite](#) called [Blue John](#), formed from crystallized limestone found in a cave in England. Because it emitted a pale phosphorescent light, it had been used for a long time to manufacture wine cups and buildings ... and had also been used by spiritualists in the previous century to fool participants of seances into seeing spirits.

Amazed, Kazuya asked, “Victorique, does that mean you used this?”

Victorique nodded wearily. “Mmm-hmm. I ground it into powder and put it on a rat. Stupid Gréville, he was terrified out of his wits, and gave me such a dirty look.”

“But wasn’t he angry when he found out you tricked him?”

“When he found out...?” Victorique repeated, mystified.

A gust of wind again blew past. The bell at the campus chapel tolled in the distance. The sky grew slightly darker, and evening mist began to dampen the air of the conservatory.

Victorique stared up at Kazuya’s face, momentarily dumbstruck. At last she said, as if the thought had never occurred to her before, “I never told him it was a trick.”

“Wh-why not?!”

“B-because, Gréville ran away before I could, and also, um...” Victorique pouted slightly. “It would’ve been too much trouble.”

Kazuya buried his face in his hands.

Victorique was always so cold and fiendish, and at the same time childish and vulnerable. Sometimes her excessive viciousness left Kazuya genuinely offended. And yet he couldn’t bring himself to hate her, because he was also beginning to realize that the way she treated him was entirely different from how she behaved towards others. Victorique never used the kind of abusive language she spoke against Kazuya with any other person. This was not out of any sense of politeness or friendliness—no, she simply didn’t care enough about anyone else to do so.

The words once spoken to him by her biological brother, Inspector Gréville de Blois, lingered in his mind. *Kujou, you may not realize this yourself, but the favors you receive from her are truly unusual and marvelous things, like constantly getting handed wads of cash by a rapacious loan shark, no strings attached.*

Even the explanation she had just given of the magic ring was something she would have never bothered to do for anyone besides him.

And once he had finally come to understand all this, he found that he could never truly come to hate her.

“Oh, I just remembered!” said Kazuya suddenly, after standing up to leave.

Victorique was absorbed in her reading, still squeezing her hands together.

Kazuya couldn't tell whether or not she was listening, but he didn't let this deter him. He opened the package he had received in the mail, and a pale blue silk kimono spilled out of it, rustling breezily.

Victorique glanced at the kimono and the fluffy pink *obi* spread out on the floor like a huge flower, then went back to her reading.

“My big sister sent this to me. I know my presents tend to be weird, but this ought to be acceptable. If you'd like, maybe you could wear it as a nightgown. Want it?”

“...”

“...Okay. If you don't want it, then I'll just have to take it back—”

“I want it!”

“You do? Really? Then, do you like it? You sure make it hard to tell with that attitude of yours!” Kazuya had been disappointed at first, but the moment she said she wanted it, his face brightened into a smile. He quickly began to demonstrate to her how to wear it. “See, the way you tie the obi goes like this, and then like this... Hey, Victorique, pay attention!”

Victorique turned her back to Kazuya irritably, then said curtly, “Nothing is impossible for my wellspring of wisdom.”

“...Uh-huh?”

“I don't need you to explain something so trivial as how to tie a sash. Go away. I'm tired of your constant nagging.”

“Excuse me?!” Kazuya indignantly untied the obi that he had wrapped around his waist, and gently set it down on top of the

kimono.

Victorique ignored him as usual.

Kazuya sighed. "I'm leaving, then. See you later, Victorique."

When she didn't respond, he slowly turned to head toward the wooden stairs, slightly crestfallen.

Victorique smoked her pipe and absentmindedly listened to the sound of even footsteps marching away. Before long, the footsteps had faded away into silence, and moments later, she heard the door to the library open, and Kazuya step outside. When the door slowly closed after him, the flow of air within the library seemed to come to a complete halt, and silence reigned once more, just as it had for the past hundreds of years.

The walls of bookshelves rising up to the ceiling, the solemn religious fresco on the distant ceiling, and the labyrinthine staircase stretching up at right angles ... everything in the tower fell in thrall to stillness, and the only movement came from the girl in the sumptuous dress, sitting by herself in the high conservatory with pipe in hand.

She languidly brought the pipe to her mouth, and took a puff.

Now she was all alone. A faint shadow of loneliness crossed her face. And then she slowly opened the fists that she had kept clenched the entire time that Kazuya was there. She had tiny palms, like those of a carefully crafted doll. Even the fingernails were as small as a child's, and the fingers were startlingly thin. The palms of both her hands were bright red and painfully swollen.

Although Victorique was forbidden to set foot outside of St. Marguerite's, not long ago she had stolen away from school and headed to a mysterious village deep in the mountains. Kazuya had witnessed her escape, and insisted on coming along to stay by her side. He helped her in crucial ways, but in the process she had nearly lost him, and desperately tried to save him with her tiny

hands that had never carried heavy things nor had ever exerted any force. Hence the flesh of her hands was very delicate, and even now they were puffy, red, and painful to the touch.

After they had returned, Victorique naturally continued to pummel Kazuya with her usual mean-spirited, fiendish abuse, and he therefore hadn't noticed that she was gripping her hands into fists to hide the wounds on their palms....

For a long moment, Victorique stared at her swollen palms as if they were something foreign to her. She tilted her head dazedly, unable to understand the state of her hands no matter how hard she tried.

With a troubled look still on her face, she at last dropped her hands down to her lap.

And then she slowly turned toward the beautiful kimono laid out on the floor.

She had restrained herself while Kazuya was there, but in fact that kimono had bewitched her with its clear ocean-blue color and exotic Far Eastern design. The fog around her heart—formed of a deep sense of lethargy, boredom, and grey feelings with no outlet, something akin to sadness and akin to anger—had lifted away from her.

Victorique reached out her trembling hand toward the mysterious cloth to touch it for the first time. The sensation of silk felt much rougher than the Western dresses that Victorique was used to wearing. The water lilies carefully drawn onto the fabric with a brush dipped in white ink were an unfamiliar type of flower to her.

She then gently extended her hand toward the obi. The pink, fluffy-looking obi felt starchy and unexpectedly stiff.

Victorique cradled the beautiful kimono and obi softly to herself, and let out a soft sigh. "Oh ... how pretty!" she murmured, her voice vanishingly tiny.

Wearing an innocent and blissful smile that she never let anyone

else see, Victorique rubbed her face against the kimono and obi over and over again....

three

As the sun began to sink into the horizon, it cast intense red light upon the spacious grounds of St. Marguerite's School. Dusk would soon fall like a heavy shroud over the fountains, the bridge running across a babbling brook, and the tall hedge.

The brass-studded library door opened without a sound, and little Victorique came trotting outside. She moved with slow and deliberate steps, protectively hugging the kimono and obi to her chest with both hands.

Victorique walked on and on.

Past the fountains.

Over the small bridge.

Down the white pebbled path.

She arrived at a garden maze in a corner of campus opposite to the library. Flower bushes grew as tall as a man, planted in imitation of an unusual form of garden beloved by the nobility in the Middle Ages. The square hedges bloomed in a scattered assortment of gold, lavender, and brilliant red flowers.

Victorique entered the maze without hesitation, her small form vanishing from sight like a young ghost swallowed up by the twilight shadows. She unerringly made her way through the path of flowers. The route was clearly a familiar one for her; someone entering this maze for the first time would have surely gotten lost.

She slipped out of the maze and emerged into a small clearing. There she found a two-story house with a modest front yard. Outside of the house, which looked far too small for human habitation, a winding iron staircase connected the first and second stories.

Victorique walked briskly inside. The house was small and colorful

enough that it could have been made out of gingerbread. The interior was like the inside of a dollhouse. The furnishings were elegant, but customized to be smaller than normal, and looked vaguely like colorful toys. The bedroom contained a girlish canopy bed and a brass dresser. In another small room that seemed to be the living room, a child-sized rocking chair sat next to the window. On top of a chest sat a plate adorably shaped like a strawberry, and a beadwork picture.

Stacks of heavy books rose from floor to ceiling.

Victorique entered her room, yawning, and gently set the kimono and obi down on a small claw footed table. She stroked the kimono with her tiny hand over and over again, wearing a genuinely delighted smile on her face. In a voice as low as an old woman's, almost in a hum, she murmured a strange tune. "Kimono, kimono... Kujou gave me a kimono!"

Overjoyed, she made a slow pirouette, nearly losing her balance in the process. She staggered back to her original spot and happily resumed stroking the kimono.

Victorique opened the door to the large wardrobe, preparing to hang up the kimono, but then had second thoughts. "That scoundrel said something about wearing it as a nightgown...."

And so she began to take off her elaborate dress of aqua-blue satin and black lace, starting with the many rows of thin ribbon on her chest.

She untied one row after another.

Untying and untying, from top to bottom...

As she untied the ribbon, tiny fabric buttons appeared underneath one by one. When she was finally finished, she moved onto the buttons.

She unbuttoned and unbuttoned.

And there was yet more unbuttoning...

When that was done, she untied the ribbons at her sleeves and undid their buttons.

At last, she had undone all of the ribbons and buttons, and paused for a breather. Next came the dress itself, but her body had grown stiff, and it took some effort before she could finally slip free. After that, she used both hands to tug off her pannier—the underwear that puffed out her skirts around the hips like an opened lace parasol—then plunked herself onto the floor, and with a few grunts of exertion, pulled her rose-embossed boots off her feet. Her finely stitched silk stockings followed, allowing her bare feet to slip into the soft ballet shoes that she wore around the house.

She sighed, and stood up again. Without the added height from her heeled boots, her proportions looked much smaller than before. She was still a white ball of fluff in her voluminous lacy camisole, three-tiered ruffled petticoat, and embroidered drawers, but she had shrunk considerably compared to when she was fully clothed.

Victorique strained herself up on her tiptoes, and after a few moments managed to put her blue satin dress away in the wardrobe. And then, at long last, she turned toward the kimono that lay on top of the table.

Her expressionless face looked as cool as ever, but there was a hint of joy.

Victorique timidly stretched her arms through the sleeves of the kimono.

First the right.

Then the left.

The flowing kimono gently draped over her dainty form. The corners of her mouth visibly relaxed. However, when she reached down to tie the obi, her face turned mystified. “Is this a belt? ... There’s no clasp. Is it a ribbon? ...But it’s much too long.”

For the next several minutes, she fumbled with the obi like a cat playing with a toy.

Then at last, in a small voice, she murmured, “This is chaos.”

Now thoroughly frustrated, Victorique decided to wind the obi around her breakably thin waist, forcing the stiff fabric to tie like a ribbon. To this she gave a nod of satisfaction.

She heaved a sigh and sank down into her rocking chair, tired from pondering over the obi. As she rocked in the chair in her kimono, she reached for a nearby book, and began to flip through the pages. With her pipe in one hand, she lit the fire and started to puff away. Soon enough, she was lost in the world of books, and she gave herself over to simply turning the pages while slowly rocking back and forth....

As night’s darkness fell, the quiet moonlight crept through the vast grounds of St. Marguerite’s School. The U-shaped main building was deserted, letting silence pervade the halls of the student dormitories. Other than the quiet footsteps of the prefects making their rounds and the dim light of their lanterns, there was no one else in sight, and nothing else in motion.

A shadow was slowly walking through this dark and silent campus, in the shape of a petite body with shoulder-length brown hair and large round glasses always on the verge of sliding down—it was Miss Cécile.

The lantern in her hand glowed orange. In her light grey nightgown, matching bonnet, and light cloak, she carefully walked down the gravel path.

She reached the entrance of the flower maze, and with a single sigh, entered the garden, vanishing from the gravel path like the ghost of a woman dissolving into thin air. “I’m sure she’s fine ... but then again, it wasn’t long ago that something happened to her. I better make a quick nighttime inspection to make sure that Miss Victorique is still there.... I’ll be in big trouble if she goes running off hand in hand with Kujou again,” she muttered under her breath as she slipped nimbly through the maze.

Cécile arrived at the modest yard and entered the small, dollhouse-like dwelling. The lights were off, and it was pitch dark inside. She crept into the bedroom and cautiously aimed her lantern at the canopy bed.

The light shone on a large frilly pillow. Victorique's tiny face was resting on top of it, asleep. Her long hair was scattered across the bedsheets like a golden dream. She slept with both of her tiny hands pressed to the side of her head like a little child.

Cécile breathed a sigh of relief. "All in its proper ... place...?"

But there was something amiss. She carefully shone her lantern onto the bed.

Victorique was wearing a nightgown that Cécile didn't recognize—light blue, and of a strange cut. A large, stiff pink ribbon wound around her waist, but it had already mostly unraveled.

Cécile stared at her, perplexed. It was highly unusual for Victorique to do anything out of her routine. She always went to the library at exactly the same time, returned at the same time, and wore the same nightgown.

Cécile shone her lantern onto the bed once more.

"Oh, dear!"

While she was sleeping, Victorique had slipped most of the way out of her Oriental-style nightgown. Her tiny bellybutton was peeking out above her daintily embroidered drawers. Under the dim light of the lantern, her stomach glowed ivory white.

Cécile couldn't help but giggle. "Oh, my. Miss Victorique, you'll catch your death of cold!" she murmured, setting down the lantern. She gently folded Victorique's nightgown closed.

Cécile left the bedroom, still giggling.

"Ugh..."

Victorique turned over.

The nightgown that Cécile had wrapped shut fell open again. With her white belly exposed to the air, Victorique slept, exhaling sweet little breaths like a small animal.

The night wore on....

Meanwhile, Kazuya was sitting at his desk in his room in the boys' dormitory.

In front of French windows hung heavy curtains woven with Gobelins tapestry. Next to them was a mahogany writing desk, lined with neat rows of textbooks and dictionaries. A pale gas lamp on the wall flickered silently.

Kazuya opened the letter from his elder sister he had received that evening at the post office, and read it over and over again. "A Blue Rose paperweight, and a white cotton blouse. What else did she want...? What's a tartan collar? Shoes and socks, pen and ink..." He put the letter down, sighing wearily.

Then he pulled himself together, and began to arrange maps, train timetables, and department store guides that he had brought with him to Sauvure. He opened one of the store pamphlets on his desk. "Hmm ... So the station is here. And that Jeantan place is over here ... Should be in walking distance. Let's see, where should I go after that...?"

Whenever Kazuya reached an impasse, he would pull out another guide and pore over it thoughtfully. Long into the night, he took meticulous notes, slowly devising his plan of attack for the next day's shopping trip....

four

“Achoo!”

The dark silent night dawned at last, bringing the brightness of the morning to the quiet grounds of St. Marguerite’s School, ushering in a day just like any other.

As the morning sun rose over the gardens, Kazuya came downstairs to the dormitory dining hall even earlier than his usual time, greeted the ever-voluptuous redheaded housemother, and took his breakfast. He ate quickly, then rose from his chair, said goodbye to the housemother, and left the dormitory with his book bag containing the notes he had made for his shopping trip.

Just as Kazuya began to walk toward the front gate, he heard light footsteps running in the distance. *Who could it be this early, and on the weekend...?* he wondered, and turned around. The other person also stopped, and gazed back at Kazuya in surprise, her eyes squinted against the brightness of the sun—it was Miss Cécile.

“Good morning.”

“Kujou...” Cécile seemed unusually agitated. She ran up to Kazuya, darting to the right and to the left.

“What’s wrong?”

“The flu!”

“Really? But you look fine to me...”

“N-no, that’s not what I mean,” Cécile said, waving her plump arms frantically up and down, clearly distraught. “Not me; Miss Victorique. She’s caught the flu!”

“Victorique did...?” Kazuya was startled. Cécile returned his gaze

with her own look of surprise and disbelief.

For the sedentary Victorique to catch the flu when she spent all of her time in the conservatory... It made no sense to him.

Cécile sounded just as confused as he was. “You know, last night, she had on a nightgown she doesn’t normally wear, with this big hard ribbon-looking thing. It had unraveled, and her bellybutton was showing, so I tried to cover her up again. And then this morning, she was already feeling dizzy and very sick...”

Kazuya put his head in his hands. The words “a nightgown she doesn’t normally wear” and “a big hard ribbon-looking thing” were all he needed to know.

Cécile noticed his reaction, then saw that he was dressed for an outing with his coat and bag. “Oh, that’s right; I forgot you were going to go shopping in Sauvrière. And you’re all set with permission to leave, too... Sorry to disturb you. Well, I’ll be going, then.”

“Um...” Kazuya nervously called after Cécile as she began to dash away. “That nightgown must be the one that I gave to Victorique. The way to tie the sash is complicated, and I bet she couldn’t figure it out. I can write down the instructions for her; it’ll just take a minute.”

“Well!” Cécile turned around and glared at him. Kazuya automatically shrank away from her fearfully. “Oh, Kujou. I understand that you wanted to make her happy by giving her something exotic, but you do have to explain how to use it, too!”

“But, uh, I tried to tell—”

“I don’t want to hear any more excuses out of you. Apologize to your teacher.”

Kazuya met Cécile’s eyes for a brief moment, but within seconds, he caved into her gaze, and hung his head. “...I’m sorry.”

“Now, go write a letter to Miss Victorique,” Cécile said in a clipped tone, despite the smile that had returned to her face.

Kazuya ran back to his room in the dormitory, and took out stationary and a pen. He sat at the mahogany desk and wrote precise directions for tying the obi, complete with diagrams. Just as he had finished and was about to fold the paper into three, an idea struck him. He opened up a drawer and rummaged around for some colored ink pens that he hadn't used in a long time. And then he began to neatly color in the diagram, filling in the kimono with light blue and the obi with pink, making the letter pretty for Victorique.

After all, she was his friend who had told him and no one else that she didn't dislike beautiful things. If he turned even a mere letter into something beautiful, perhaps that would make her happy.

Kazuya folded the paper and inserted it into an envelope made out of traditional paper from his homeland. After this, he left the dormitory, and made a detour to a certain flower garden that he had visited before. He searched for a tiny golden flower, and gently tucked it inside the envelope.

"All done." Kazuya nodded, pleased with his handiwork.

Then he headed toward Victorique's villa, following Cécile's directions. He tried to picture Victorique anywhere else on campus besides the library, but drew a blank. When he finally arrived at his destination, he stared up in shock at the huge wall of flowers arranged into a maze.

"...What the heck?" Kazuya stood dumbfounded for a moment. Faced with no other choice, he gingerly stepped into the maze, but only made it part of the way in before having second thoughts. Not only was he afraid of getting lost, he might not even be able to find the entrance again. He went back outside.

While Kazuya was staring up helplessly at the flower hedges, Cécile happened across him. Understanding his dilemma, she told him that she would deliver the letter. She took the envelope from his hands and vanished effortlessly into the flower maze.

As he watched Cécile walk away with a confident stride, for some reason Kazuya found himself confronted with a strange mixture of loneliness and frustration. Unable to interpret this emotion, he descended into a sulk while awaiting Cécile's return.

"Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!" Victorique sneezed over and over again, shuddering violently all over her tiny body.

She had awakened that morning not knowing why the ceiling was spinning, or why her face was hot, or why she was feeling too listless to get out of bed. For the first time in her life, Victorique had caught the flu.

Her small and weak body wasn't exactly made of the sturdiest stuff. But ever since her childhood, she had led an orderly, austere lifestyle entirely within the four walls of either a room at the top of a tower, or the villa at St. Marguerite's. Therefore, coming down with a fever and being confined to her bed was an unfamiliar experience for her, although perhaps contrary to expectations.

"Achoo!" With every sneeze, her long blond hair flew up into the air, then fell back down on top of the silken sheets. She sat for a minute in silence, an oddly miserable expression on her face.

Victorique shakily stretched out a thin hand and reached for a piece of tissue paper.

"Pff-fffft!"

And blew her nose.

"Pffft! Pffft! Pffft!"

Tears collected in her eyes; she had apparently blown too hard. She held her nose in her hands and sat quietly, her shoulders quivering in discomfort.

The door quietly opened, and Cécile poked her head into the room.

Victorique slowly turned around. "Oh, it's you," she muttered

wearily. Her strained voice sounded even huskier, and her bright red cheeks had swelled up to an even greater puffiness than usual.

Cécile carefully walked inside with a pitcher of water, a packet of medicine, and a small cup of milk, and set them down on the bedside table. Then she paused, seeming to remember something. “I ran into Kujou.”

“Hmm?”

“I told him that you were sick, and he was very worried and upset to hear that. He must be very fond of you.” She giggled, but suddenly remembered her errand. “Here you go. A letter for you.”

“...A letter?”

“I saw him pacing around in front of the garden, so I thought I’d deliver it for him. Try to write a reply as quick as you can. He looked like he was in a hurry.”

“Why is he in such a hurry? Achoo!” As Victorique looked up at Cécile with a puzzled expression, her head bobbed forward in a sneeze.

Cécile smiled. “He’s going to Sauvrème on a shopping trip. His relatives asked him to buy a lot of things for them. He looked rather excited about it.”

“The likes of Kujou, getting excited? ...Achoo!” sneezed Victorique disapprovingly.

But after Cécile left the bedroom to tidy up the rest of the house, Victorique regarded the Oriental-style envelope in her hands, her gaze tinged with pleasure. The paper felt coarse to the touch, reminding her of the kimono that she had rubbed her cheeks against so ecstatically last night. She curiously turned it around to look at the back, then turned it back to the front. After enjoying the envelope for a few moments, she enthusiastically tore open the seal. A golden flower spilled out of the envelope, and this made her spirits soar even higher.

And then, with a wide grin across her fever-reddened face, she

unfolded the letter. At first she was deeply impressed by the beautifully colored drawing of the kimono and obi, but when she began to read the first line, her emerald-green eyes immediately narrowed in anger.

The letter opened as follows:

Victorique, how are you? I heard you fell asleep with your tummy sticking out like a big dummy. Miss Cécile told me all about it. Boy, you sure are dumb, Victorique! Anyway, here's how you tie the obi...

Victorique crumpled up the letter into a ball with her tiny hands. She sneezed, then took that very same letter and blew her runny nose into it. And then she raised her small white hand and threw the balled up paper at the wall.

“Miss Victorique, do write back to Kujou. He was so very worried about you,” Cécile called out from the other room.

“Hmph.” Victorique’s green eyes narrowed into a thin, angry line....

Kazuya was still waiting on the pebbled path, fidgeting anxiously. When he saw Cécile reemerge from the garden maze, he quickly called out to her, “How is she doing?”

“She can’t stop sneezing, and her face is bright red.” Cécile offhandedly pulled out a folded piece of paper from her pocket. It was on very pretty stationary watermarked with an illustration of roses inside a birdcage. The paper was soaked in floral perfume, and emanated a faintly saccharine scent.

This was Kazuya’s first time receiving a letter from Victorique. He patiently waited for Cécile to leave, and when he was finally alone, he eagerly unfolded the letter.

There, in shaky letters, was a single, very large word:

STUPID

Kazuya’s shoulders slumped.

Now he felt like a monumental idiot for having opened it with such excitement. For a long while, he stood there dejectedly. But eventually he remembered that his train would be leaving soon, and he turned around and walked away.

Kazuya took a couple steps, but then whirled back around. He turned toward the overgrown tangle of flowers that shielded Victorique's villa from view, and roared, "What the hell was that!? You're the stupid one, Victorique!"

There was no answer. With increasing frustration, Kazuya added, "Someone as mean as you isn't getting any presents from me! You hear me?!"

His shout echoed pathetically back to him.

From deep inside the flowers, he thought he heard a strange noise that sounded like an "achoo!" But all soon fell heartlessly silent....

Kazuya slowly walked away, looking over his shoulder again and again, still bothered by thoughts of Victorique.

bedroom one

Soft morning light streamed through the closed French windows of the bedroom. The bobbin lace curtains were half open, allowing sunlight to spill into the small room.

“Achoo!”

Victorique was resting on her stomach in the canopy bed, her face buried in a large, frilly pillow. Now and again she sneezed, jerking her small head violently. Her long blond hair, hanging limply onto the silk sheets, fluttered each time.

She listlessly raised her head. Her cheeks were bright red. Even her emerald-green eyes, normally so cold, were moist like underwater gemstones.

“Achoo! Achoo! Ahh-choo!” Her head shook in a series of sneezes, and then she collapsed into the pillow, spent.

A faint flicker of anger crossed her face. She parted her small lips, as red as a ripe cherry, and muttered, “So Kujou went on a trip, did he...”

Silence returned to the bedroom.

Flames of wrath appeared once more in her wet eyes.

“The likes of Kujou, excited about his trip, is he...” She rolled over on her back, and stared bleary-eyed up at the stained glass lamp hanging from the ceiling. Her eyes uneasily blinked open and shut, as if fever had blurred her vision.

“That scoundrel...” Surrendering to the fever, Victorique closed her eyes. “So he left on his own,” she murmured, sullenly pulling up the down quilt and slipping deep into the bed. Her small body disappeared underneath the covers, leaving the opulent, though still very small bedroom, seemingly empty.

“Achoo!” The down quilt shook.

“Achoo! Achoo!” After several more sneezes, the room went quiet, and then...

From inside the bed came a strange, indistinct sound that could have been sniffing, or perhaps sobbing.

Outside the window, a songbird perched on a branch in the flower garden, chirping a high, thin cry.

one

chapter two — the blue rose

[1]

The train whistle sounded.

Holding his book bag in one hand, Kazuya rushed to the platform of the village's single small station as it wobbled unsteadily from the vibrations of the approaching steam engine. It was the weekend, and the trains heading from the mountains into the city were packed with people. Villagers wearing their Sunday best elbowed each other onto the train. Kazuya joined the line and climbed aboard through a large iron door.

He walked through a narrow corridor and peeked through the glass windows of the small passenger compartments. But each one already had three or four travelers sitting down and making themselves comfortable while reading books or opening lunch boxes of roast chicken and bread. The train was crowded everywhere Kazuya looked, and he hesitated from entering any of the compartments. Besides, if he were to run into any older ladies with children, as soon as they saw the exotic boy from the Orient, they would start asking for his name, age, where he went to school, and every other detail of his life. He had already experienced that when he took the train to St. Marguerite's after his ship arrived in Sauvure.

Kazuya found a compartment that contained only one young man sitting by himself, looking out of the window with his chin resting in his hand. Deciding that this place would do, Kazuya carefully opened the metal door, and politely asked, "May I sit here?"

The man, still looking outside the window, coolly replied, "Go ahead."

Kazuya closed the door, and sat down in the seat across from the man, who appeared to be a noble. The man was dressed so

impeccably in his fine silk shirt, silver cufflinks, and polished boots, that it made Kazuya wonder if even a woman would have gone to so much trouble to dress herself. And that pose of his—gazing outside the window, legs crossed, his head resting wearily in his hand—looked suspiciously affected.

The man sighed, then turned toward Kazuya.

Kazuya gave a shout and jumped out of his seat.

The man's hair tapered to an unnatural point on the top of his head and glittered like a golden drill. It could be none other than Inspector Gréville de Blois.

When the inspector also realized who was sitting across from him, at first his mouth fell open in shock, and then a severely displeased look appeared on his face. "Well, it's you!"

"That's what I was going to say! Shoot, maybe I should move to another—"

"They're all full."

"...I guess so." Kazuya reluctantly sat back down.

They both hung their heads in disappointment.

After a few moments of silence, the inspector spoke aloud what was running through both their minds. "This is truly tiresome. Must we even run into each other in a place like this?"

"My thoughts exactly."

And then they said no more to each other. They turned their eyes toward the window and to their shopping lists, but after about half an hour, they eventually ran out of things to do.

"So, Kujou, how about some small talk?"

"Small talk? You and me?"

"Well, we've got nothing else to do."

Kazuya grudgingly nodded, and the inspector faced him gravely.

Still, what could they possibly talk about? At first, they tried to discuss global affairs and the recent world war, but inevitably, a police inspector who was a member of the nobility in a powerful Western European country and a scholar of commoner background from an island country in the Far East had almost nothing on which they could see eye to eye. But since Kazuya was still in school and had the advantage in knowledge, he ran circles around the inspector's arguments, and soon forced him to hastily change the subject. "That reminds me, Kujou."

"Yes?" Kazuya replied breathlessly. He hadn't had the opportunity to best someone in a debate for a long time, and he was feeling exhilarated.

"Speaking of the Great War. Do you know the reason that I'm heading to Sauvrière right now?"

"...How do you expect me to know that? I'm not Victorique. I wouldn't know things that I've never heard before." Kazuya added raggedly, "After all, I'm just a half-wit with a talent for the mediocre."

"Why are you announcing that so proudly?" Inspector de Blois asked, frowning. "Anyway, I'm going to Sauvrière because I was called there by the Sauvrière national police. The current superintendent is a man by the name of Signore. He's reached a high post for someone of his age, and yet he's also utterly without imagination. There's a certain case that the national police has been racking their brains over, and they're asking me, the great detective, to solve it for them."

"Are you sure you'll be all right on your own?" Kazuya asked with a touch of sarcasm, still bewildered by the sudden change in topic.

The inspector ignored him. "My boy, do you know what our country lost during the Great War?"

"What it lost? The war itself was won, but young lives were lost in battle, historical buildings were destroyed in the firebombing, and

—”

“I’m talking about the treasure of the royal family.” The inspector clicked his tongue in disgust. “The treasury of the Sauvurean royal family was looted in the chaos of the war, and many historically valuable works of art vanished. It was believed that they had long since crossed the Atlantic to be snatched up by some nouveau riche collectors in the New World, but now it seems that they’ve been in Sauvure all this time. Which means...”

Kazuya was getting a feeling that he had heard a story like this very recently. As he thought back and tried to remember who had told it to him, the inspector continued, “Several years ago, some of those art pieces resurfaced on the Sauvure black market. And that’s not all. The valuables of the Romanov family were thought to have disappeared without a trace after they were relocated to Europe right before the Russian Revolution in 1917, but they also ended up on the European black market, along with some of the archaeological artifacts that were coming in from the colonies. And that black market appears to be in Sauvrière. We have received word that collectors from all over Western Europe have been secretly gathering in Sauvrière lately. But we haven’t been able to get any leads on them. That’s why the superintendent called for the assistance of my superior brain. What do you think?”

“What do I think...?”

“Marvelous, isn’t it?”

“Um, sure,” Kazuya said, nodding.

The inspector sighed and shook his head, then brought his hands up to his pointed, drill-like hair and lovingly began to adjust it. “Hmm...” As he stroked his hair, he gazed at Kazuya for lack of anything else to do.

And then he pulled out his pocket watch, lifted the cover, and gravely intoned, “One hour left.”

“Right.”

“Now it’s your turn. Tell me something interesting.”

“No, thank you!” Kazuya promptly turned away from him, and focused his eyes on the scenery outside the window.

Over the course of their conversation, the train had left the lush green mountain valleys and had advanced steadily toward the city. The foliage visible from the window was thinning out, giving way to gently-rolling plains packed with dense rows of houses lining streets that bustled with automobiles and carriages.

It sure is lonely to go shopping on your own, Kazuya suddenly thought to himself.

And then he began to think back to the previous two times that he had gone on unexpected journeys with his petite friend, Victorique de Blois. He had exploded in rage when she called him “stupid” in that letter, but by now the strangest thing had happened—his feelings of irritation had completely dissolved. Instead, all that was left were memories of Victorique’s incomparably strange behavior when they had gone traveling for the first time.

She didn’t even know how to buy a ticket, didn’t understand how much money she needed to bring with her, and had wandered every which way. While riding the train, she gazed out of the window in awe, and when they reached the station, her questions about this and that were endless. And when Kazuya whistled for a carriage, her eyes opened so wide....

Back then, Kazuya hadn’t known anything about Victorique’s circumstances. Therefore, when he had said to her, “You don’t get out much, do you?” she instantly fell into a silent sulk. But that sullen face of hers was still so adorable to him.

And their second trip together was thoroughly unpleasant. Victorique was in a foul mood from the start, and spent the whole time ignoring Kazuya. But at the very end, she had told him, “Kujou, let’s go home together!”

That alone made everything worth it for him. The indignation he felt toward her spitefulness, her devilishly sharp tongue, and her ill

humor always had a way of dissolving like magic with no more than a handful of words from her....

Feeling someone else's gaze on him, he looked up, and found Inspector de Blois staring intently at him with weary eyes.

Kazuya broke the silence. "Why do I have to be here with *you*?"

"Stole the words right out of my mouth." The inspector's eyes, the same green as his half-sister's, were slightly wet; perhaps he was contemplating some melancholy thoughts of his own. He fixed Kazuya with a reproachful glare. "For God's sake... Having to run into you like this really gets my goat."

"The feeling is mutual."

"I'm sick of looking at you."

"Same here."

The steam locomotive continued to clatter down the rails, carrying the two disgruntled men.

Before long, an hour had passed, and the train finally pulled into its destination in Sauvrière.

two

Sauvrème's main railway terminal, named Charles de Gilet Station after a king of Sauvure who had reigned during the time of its construction in the late 19th century, was a huge, magnificent structure, built to demonstrate the small kingdom's might. The ceiling of the atrium was made entirely from glass, which filtered the intense sunlight of early summer as it gently settled upon the dozens of platforms that lined the floor far below. Grand pillars of black brick and a large round clock towered over the iron walkways between the platforms.

People scurried endlessly across the floor like tiny specks of dust. Whenever a new train pulled into the station with a deafening roar, arriving passengers piled out onto the platform en masse. Red uniformed porters whisked away their luggage. Feathered bonnets swayed atop the heads of the lady passengers. Aristocratic gentlemen strolled past, rapping finely crafted animal-head canes against the floor. Children toddled by, holding onto their mothers' hands.

A huge building of thick, sturdy glass and black iron—it was luxurious, yet functional, an architectural style that had become increasingly common in the modern age. Perhaps it symbolized the present day in Sauvrème, a riverside city that was not only home to an old and illustrious royal family, but had in recent years rapidly developed into an important financial center of Europe, and into an industrial city that smelled of iron and coal.

“...Jacqueline!”

Kazuya jumped, his ears ringing from the inspector's sudden shout. He turned, and saw the inspector calling out to a young woman who had walked past him on the platform. She was dressed elegantly, but in a sedate color more often worn by older married ladies. Her straight brown hair, worn in a simple up-do, had lost some of its sheen.

The woman turned around, but when she saw the inspector's hairstyle, she backed away from him in surprise. He took a look at her face, then said in disappointment, "Pardon me, I thought you were someone else."

The woman smiled in understanding, and walked away.

"Who is Jacqueline?" asked Kazuya.

The inspector pretended not to hear him, and quickened his pace over the iron walkway toward the large ticket gate. Kazuya walked in the same direction, wondering what he had just witnessed.

Somehow the inspector seemed deflated. Even his pointed drill drooped a little bit.

As they exited Charles de Gilet Station, dazzling sunlight flooded their faces, momentarily blinding them to the streets of Sauvrème. When at last their eyes adjusted, they took in the sight of a vast intersection in front of the station, alive with horse-drawn omnibuses flying around corners without slowing down, and automobiles polished to a shine. Eye-catching storefront windows lined the spacious sidewalks. A steady flow of gentlemen carrying canes and splendid ladies holding parasols came in and out of the shops. Roads, shops, and tall buildings jockeyed for position in front of the station.

Kazuya's eyes lingered on one particular store window. Among all of the gaudy storefronts, there was one whose sign was tasteful and unobtrusive—a pipe shop. The window was filled with pipes of various sizes and materials, including ceramic and metal, along with pipe holders. As decoration, there was a single small ladies' shoe shaped like a shimmering glass slipper. He realized that it was in fact a pipe holder, sculpted out of jade into the shape of a shoe. And then before he knew it, he was opening the door and asking the shopkeeper how much it cost. For Kazuya, who normally avoided unnecessary purchases and saved his spending money, the price was right, and so he bought it without hesitation.

"Could you tie it up with a ribbon? It's for a girl. Oh, yes, that red ribbon will do."

The shopkeeper's eyes dropped down to the pipe holder. "For a girl?" he asked, bemused.

Kazuya walked out of the shop in high spirits. At exactly the same moment, the door to the adjacent shop also opened, and Inspector de Blois came out. He had apparently done some shopping of his own, and sauntered outside with a spring in his step. But when the two of them saw each other, their smiles instantly turned to scowls.

The inspector stared long and hard at the bundle Kazuya held carefully in his arms, and snorted contemptuously.

Kazuya also looked down at the inspector's hands. He was lovingly clutching a pricey antique porcelain doll with curly blond hair, large eyes, and a dress trimmed generously with lace.

Kazuya grimaced. He remembered once paying a visit to the police station and seeing the inspector's office filled with such dolls. And he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the inspector himself blissfully resting one of them on his knee.

"It truly suits you."

"Got any more worthless things to say with that good-for-nothing face of yours?" the inspector snapped. Then he pointed at a large brick building looming across the street. Several uniformed policemen stood guard in front of the entrance. "I'm off to present my brilliant brain to the police headquarters. So long, Kujou." He started to swiftly walk away, but then something seemed to occur to him, and he turned back toward Kazuya. "Be careful, Kujou."

"Huh? Of what?"

"Hmph. As you can see, Sauvrème has modernized these past few years—the transportation system is developing, tall buildings are rapidly proliferating.... The city is as lively as can be, a draw for tourists far and wide. But all of this also means that crime is on the rise."

Kazuya couldn't help shooting a quick look at his surroundings. Inspector de Blois knitted his brow. "My boy, the city is a terrifying

place. It fascinates you with its glamour, but every now and then, it opens its gaping maw and gobbles up newcomers whole. And then it closes its mouth as if nothing had happened, and the ones devoured are never seen again.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying it’s gotten dangerous. Have you heard the rumors about ‘the ones who vanished into the darkness’?”

“No...”

“In the past few years, Sauvrière has had several cases of sudden disappearances. Mostly young women and children. They go shopping in the department stores, then vanish without a trace, or they try to escort whom they think is a lost child to the police station, but disappear on the way. The cases follow various patterns. Apparently, headquarters has been receiving a lot of complaints from family members of young women who have disappeared in these ways. Well, that probably includes quite a few runaways, too... Nevertheless, an unusually high number of people have vanished into the darkness of the city. So you too must be careful.”

“Y-yes, sir...” Kazuya suddenly remembered Avril’s book.

“There was this noblewoman who went inside a department store dressing room. But when the attendant opened the door, there was nothing but a bloody severed head inside....”

“This little girl in a pretty dress was crying, and anyone who talked to her, thinking she was an orphan, would disappear. They turned a corner and vanished, leaving only their clothes behind....”

“There’s this bloodthirsty murderer who dresses like a vagabond. She hangs the corpses of countless children beneath layers of old clothes....”

The ghost stories in that book must have been based on the disappearance cases occurring in Sauvrière.

Inspector de Blois pulled a watch out of his breast pocket and checked the time. Then he distractedly said goodbye to Kazuya, and

walked away toward the tall building—the headquarters of the Sauvure national police. Clearly at ease in the city, he nimbly crossed the street, dodging oncoming carriages, and vanished into the building.

Kazuya watched him go, then set off down the road by himself.

The streets of Sauvurème were packed with buildings, carriages, automobiles, and of course, people. The congestion was fierce. Everyone was on the move. The people hurrying to their destinations, perhaps as part of the morning commute, were mostly wearing simple and utilitarian attire. Kazuya guessed that they worked in the businesses nearby. Once in a while, nobles in elegant dresses or three-piece suits would alight from carriages and disappear into high-class tailoring shops or galleries. People of various complexions, presumably tourists, were also milling to and fro, walking with a map in one hand and pointing at a landmark with the other.

At the other end of the spectrum were the homeless: dressed in rags, huddled on every street corner, holding out soiled tin cans to passersby, clamoring for spare change. Some of them were elderly, and some were women. Several times, Kazuya even saw children who were younger than himself. All sorts of people crowded Sauvurème, a city of both ancient traditions and rapid development, as if various speeds of life shared a disjointed coexistence in the same big city.

“...Huh?” Kazuya left the area in front of the station and walked over to Sauvure palace. For this modern city, the domed palace alone preserved the last vestiges of its medieval beauty. In the square in front of the palace, the Sauvurean flag was flying. Red and gold uniformed palace guardsmen marched in precise formation like toy soldiers. This was the home of the royal family, a quintessential piece of Sauvurème that was a must-see for any tourist.

“I thought it should be around here, but...” Kazuya swiveled his head around, searching for Jeantan. The high-end department store

should have been one of the tall buildings on the other side of the palace square.

When he opened his bag to take out his map, he accidentally dropped his wallet. He managed to catch it before it fell, but all of his loose change jangled to the ground.

“...Nine fifty-seven,” he heard a small voice say.

Kazuya quickly picked up his money, and looked in the direction of the voice. The passersby went on striding briskly past him, not bothering to pay attention to a stranger dropping his change. As he peered around, wondering who had just spoken ... across the crowd of people, a pair of sharp eyes glittered out from the dark shadows beneath the ornamented façade of a building.

“Is that who...?” Kazuya retrieved his change and stood up. A tiny figure with dark, unnerving eyes slowly emerged from the darkness.

It was a child of no more than ten years old. He wore grimy, ragged clothing, and his big toe stuck out of his torn canvas shoes. His eyes were blue, and he appeared to be European, but he was so filthy that it was hard to tell what color his hair and skin were.

“You dropped them. I was watching,” he said in a low voice.

He doesn't seem like an ordinary kid.... Kazuya frowned. “If you were watching, why didn't you help me?”

“If I had helped you out of the kindness of my heart, then you would've hit me and claimed I was trying to rob you and turned me over to the police. I've decided not to be kind to people.” The boy gave Kazuya's hands a hard stare with his dark eyes. He was staring inordinately hard even though Kazuya wasn't holding anything. Then he looked up. “Where are you going? You don't know the way, do you?”

“...To Jeantan. I think it's around here.”

“It's nowhere near here, you hick. You've still got a long walk. And it's hard to explain the way. I can take you instead.”

“Really?”

“Gimme some paper.”

“...Paper?”

The boy stamped the ground in frustration, then pointed at Kazuya’s wallet. “The paper you have in there. Give me one of those and I’ll be your guide.”

“Oh...” Kazuya was definitely lost, but he figured that if he had a long way to go, then accepting the offer would still be cheaper than taking a carriage. He handed the boy a single bill.

The boy snatched it away from him with startling alacrity; it disappeared inside his ragged clothing like a magic trick. And then he stepped a few paces back, shielding his head with both hands as if afraid he would be struck, and pointed at a building across the street. “It’s right there.”

“Huh?”

“That’s Jeantan. See ya later, stupid Chinaman!”

“Ack! You tricked me! Hey, stop!” Kazuya waved his arms about and tried to chase him, but the boy quickly slunk away, vanishing into the shadows of the building. Kazuya peered down, and saw a small hole that seemed to lead into an underground drain pipe, about big enough for one child to quickly hide inside.

“Who’re you calling a Chinaman?!” Kazuya shouted angrily, but he composed himself and started walking again. He hadn’t noticed it before, but there was an enormous eight-sided brick building across the street, constructed in an old-fashioned style; clearly it had seen a lot of history. Around it hung a number of purple banners in the same octagonal shape as the building, with the word “Jentan” printed on them. A steady stream of shoppers carrying glossy purple shopping bags emerged from inside.

Kazuya started to cross the street. Suddenly, he felt something grab his ankle. A large, dry, cold hand, like it belonged to a corpse, wrapped around his ankle and refused to let go. Startled, he looked

down at his feet.

It was an old woman wrapped in layers of tattered clothing. Her hair stood on end as if the wind had blown it in every direction, and her skin was dry and sooty. Her legs were bare, and her hair and eyes were black. As the old woman held onto Kazuya's ankle, she shrilly cried out in accented French, "My daughter was eaten!"

Kazuya stared at her in shock. She glared back at him with a piercing gleam in her eyes. The old woman looked swollen in her ragged clothing, as if she had stuffed three lumps of balled up cloth underneath, which lurched wildly as she moved. The fitful sway of her clothing seemed somehow sinister. Kazuya suddenly recalled one of the ghost stories that Avril had told him.

*"Then there's this bloodthirsty murderer who dresses like a vagabond....
Beneath layers of old clothes...
She hangs the corpses of countless children!"*

Can't be... Still, she sure looks like that ghost story come to life, thought Kazuya.

Suddenly, the old woman blurted out, "It ate my daughter!" Her shaking, blackened finger pointed directly at the Jeantan building.

The eight-sided building gleamed under the summer sun.

Kazuya stared back at her in astonishment.

The old woman opened her mouth, but just when she was about to say something more...

A young doorman ran toward them from the entrance of Jeantan. Spitting curses at the old woman, he gave her a hard kick. She let out a shrill, sad cry, and fled down the cobblestone street on all fours like an animal.

As Kazuya stood there, stunned, the doorman addressed him politely. "I do apologize, sir. That woman has been a nuisance to our guests entering the building."

"Is she always doing that?" asked Kazuya, still shaken by what he

had seen.

“Every day. Whenever we see her, we make sure to drive her away.”

This meant that story really was based on something that happened in Sauvrière, thought Kazuya. This woman must have been the model.

“Please forgive the inconvenience. Allow me, sir.” The young doorman led Kazuya to the octagonal brick building, and opened the glass double doors. “Welcome to Jeantan,” he announced respectfully. “There’s nothing you can’t find here. Please come in!”

three

At Jeantan, the ceilings were high, and the spacious interior was all in white. Stacks of boxes towered over the vast sales floor. Many items, such as expensive jewelry, teddy bears, or ladies' lingerie, occupied their own individual shop spaces within departments, while other shops were partitioned off by glass doors.

Youthful and attractive men and women staffed the counters. They included a diverse and colorful array of nationalities, representing everyone from young Northern European men with chiseled good looks, to girls with exotic olive complexions.

Kazuya walked up to a Nordic-looking male clerk and asked where he could find a Blue Rose. The clerk directed him in broken French to a location far from the main shopping area. Kazuya boarded an elevator to the top floor and headed down a hallway, all the while thinking to himself how odd it was that such a popular item would be kept in such an out-of-the-way place.

The higher he went, the more glass-partitioned luxury shops he saw. The white hallway stretched on, and the occasional shop sign sparkled glamorously, but there were few customers.

"Is this where it is...?" Kazuya stopped in front of one of the doors. It did appear to be the door that the salesman had described to him—but there weren't any signs on it, and the door wasn't glass, but made of heavy oak. Unsure if he was in the right place, Kazuya cautiously opened the door.

The door opened into a shop. Black and white checkerboard tile lined the floor between brown walls. A chandelier in the shape of a flower glittered from the ceiling, providing an accent to the tastefully refined decor.

In the middle of the room stood rows of glass cases. Among others, they displayed wristwatches studded with sparkling jewels, decorative crowns, and ornamental daggers.

Kazuya hesitantly entered the room, puzzled by the absence of any store clerks. Then he cried out, "There it is!"

Sitting ever so casually on top of one of the glass cases was the Blue Rose paperweight. For a mere glass copy of a blue diamond, it possessed a translucent glow, and Kazuya could see how beautifully it resembled the shape of a large rose. It fit perfectly in his palm. Had it been a real diamond, it would have been worth a fortune.

Elsewhere in the room, there were many other items on display: fine china, a brooch, and a delicately fashioned comb. Kazuya picked each one up and peered at them closely.

All of a sudden, a loud voice rang out. "Who's there?!"

Overcome by surprise, Kazuya dropped everything he was holding. He managed to catch the china in time, but the paperweight, brooch, and comb fell to the floor. Despite the loud crash they made, none of them broke. Kazuya breathed a sigh of relief. "I-I'm sorry! Please forgive me." As he gathered up the things he had dropped, he looked up at the three people standing before him.

One of them was a large man in an elegantly tailored suit. He looked to be around his mid-thirties, and had tanned skin and a toned body. His eyes were strangely sharp.

A man and woman wearing the purple uniform of Jeantan's clerks hovered behind him. The man aimed a penetrating glare at Kazuya. But the woman only seemed bemused.

The large man glowered at Kazuya accusingly. "What were you doing here?"

"Huh? Um, I came to buy a Blue Rose...."

The two men exchanged a look. "Come back tonight," the older man said.

"T-tonight...?" Kazuya frowned doubtfully. Wasn't the store open all day? "Why tonight?"

"You came to buy the Blue Rose, didn't you?"

“Yes. Three Blue Roses.”

The two men slowly turned to look at each other. Finally, the female clerk whispered to the two men in front of her. They nodded.

“Three Blue Rose paperweights?”

“Yes...”

“In that case, you can go to the stationery counter on the second floor.”

“Oh.”

With a niggling feeling in the back of his mind telling him that something was not quite right, Kazuya headed out of the room...

And soon became lost.

By the time Kazuya noticed it, he had already taken a clattering, poorly lit elevator to the first floor and walked a distance down a gloomy corridor. He turned around and backtracked down the corridor, but then realized what had happened. After leaving that strange room with the glass cases to go back downstairs, he had inadvertently entered a different elevator from the one he had taken before. He guessed that this elevator must have been for staff use. The lighting was very weak, the floor was stained with unidentifiable reddish-brown spots, and there was an odd fishy smell lingering inside....

And this first floor corridor where he had come out of the elevator was also dark, and oppressively narrow. Starkly unornamented gas lamps dangled like the heads of snakes perched unnaturally high up on the walls, shining their faint bluish light down on Kazuya. There were wide intervals between each lamp, which plunged the spaces between the pale lights into opaque darkness, leaving a murky boundary where the wall ended and the floor began.

The hissing gas lamps swayed unsteadily, as if they would go out at

any moment. Kazuya felt uneasy, and decided to hurry back down the corridor.

“—ils!”

Kazuya heard a voice. He froze, and immediately looked down—it felt like the voice came from beneath the floorboards.

He pricked his ears, but heard nothing.

And just as he began to walk again...

“... e ... vils.”

“I knew it! I heard a voice ... a girl’s voice.” Kazuya stopped again. He slowly looked up at the ceiling. This time, it felt like the voice was coming from above. But of course there was no one there; he could only see the reddish-brown stains of some liquid on the ceiling, in a pattern vaguely reminiscent of a human face.

“Devils!”

Suddenly, someone shouted next to Kazuya’s ear. He shrieked and whirled around. No one was there. Down the corridor, he saw only pale bluish shadows, wriggling and hissing under the gas lamps.

Devils...?

The gas lamps suddenly hissed. For a second, blue flames jumped up to the ceiling. They lit up the other end of the dark corridor, and there he saw what looked like several thin white sticks tangled up together. “A body?!” Kazuya blurted out.

Large opened eyes gazed at him vacantly. The thin white sticks were arms and legs. They were twisted, jumbled up into a position impossible for a human body, forming a gnarled lump out of which countless pairs of opened eyes glared at him resentfully.

Kazuya gingerly crept toward them. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh ... so that’s what they are.” At first they looked like a hill of fresh corpses, but on closer inspection, they were mannequins. As they lay on the floor, some still in the pose they had assumed to

model dresses, while others had their arms and legs torn off and scattered nearby, now reduced to nothing but torsos...

Underneath the pile of mannequins, several wooden boxes were strewn across the floor. More mannequin limbs peeked out of the partially opened boxes.

The same strange reddish stains that were in the elevator covered the floor. They were dry, and cotton-like balls of dust collected on top of them; presumably they were years old.

Kazuya suddenly felt very curious about the one box with a closed lid at the very back. He moved closer, and carefully reached out to open it.

But as he had suspected, there was only another mannequin inside. This one was curled up in the fetal position. Long sandy-colored hair veiled its body. Kazuya began to close the lid, but then a thought suddenly occurred to him.

I wonder ... why is this the only mannequin with its eyes closed?

It felt as if a cold hand had touched Kazuya's back, and he shuddered.

And then the mannequin opened its eyes.

Kazuya screamed and jumped away.

The sandy-haired girl in the box cried out, "There are devils here!"

At first, he didn't catch what she had said in her thick Russian accent. Her jewel-like eyes were a deep violet, and cloudy, like a pool of water tainted with a drop of milk. She rose from the box as if she were made of gears and springs, and grabbed Kazuya's wrist with both hands to prevent him from escaping. The force of her grip was so fearsomely strong that it didn't seem to belong to a girl....

But her hands were trembling violently, and her small, pearly white teeth chattered. "Devils! Devils!" she repeated over and over in her thickly accented French, twisting her head around farther than seemed humanly possible. Each time she jerked her head, her sandy

hair flew up into the nightmarish darkness, whipping against Kazuya's face.

Kazuya gasped. "S-stop! What's wrong?!" he asked frantically.

But the girl didn't listen to him. She only screamed again and again in her heavy Russian accent, rolling her Rs so strongly that she could barely be understood. "There are devils here! There are devils here!"

And then she yanked on Kazuya with terrifying strength and parted her thin, colorless lips. Inside her gaping mouth, her two small but sharply pointed canine teeth reflected the pale light of the gas lamps. "Call—call police! There are devils here! A lot of devils! They kill us!"

"What?! Did you witness a crime? I should tell an employee what —"

"No, no. Police, call police!"

The girl released Kazuya's wrist, then buried her head in her hands and wheezed loudly and painfully. He instinctively backed away from her.

The lamps hissed again. The flames shuddered, and abruptly went out.

"H-hey...?" Kazuya called out in the darkness.

There was no answer.

Kazuya felt himself start to run. He didn't have the faintest idea what was going on, but he had to do something...

Kazuya stumbled out of Jeantan and whistled for a carriage. A small one-horse carriage driven by an old coachman came to a stop. A large scar ran from right to left across the coachman's face.

Kazuya dashed toward the carriage and jumped on board.

“Sauvrème Police Headquarters, in front of Charles de Gilet Station!”

A grimace spread across the coachman’s scarred face. He nodded, and cracked the whip. The horse began to gallop across the cobblestones.

Kazuya looked up at the eight-sided building. As he wiped cold sweat from his brow, he noticed a pair of blue eyes staring at him from the shadows underneath the building’s façade.

Small eyes. A child’s eyes. It was that boy from before ... that strange street urchin who had tricked him.

Kazuya suddenly remembered when that boy had blurted out “nine-hundred fifty-seven”. What on earth could that have meant? For now, no answer came to mind.

The boy gazed steadily at Kazuya. His lips were curved into a smile....

bedroom two

“Achoo!”

From the clear sky, the white glow of palpably humid sunshine fell onto the elegant gardens that fanned out through the grounds of St. Marguerite’s School. But hidden deep within the gardens, at the end of the long twisting path inside a garden maze, a small villa that looked like a gingerbread house stood perfectly silent, its windows largely impervious to the rays of the dazzling midday sun. Across the French windows of the bedroom, bobbin lace curtains draped shut, and the inside was dark.

On top of a canopy bed, a bulge protruded from a down quilt. It was a small lump, so small that it could have been mistaken for a kitten hiding underneath, and it was squirming slightly.

“Achoo! Achoo! Ach-choo!”

Every time a sneeze rang out, the lump beneath the blankets quivered....

Under the down quilt, Victorique was in the throes of a nightmare.

She saw herself in a darkened room with a round floor. Books covered every surface of the room, and in between the piles of books she caught glimpses of a small rocking chair, a table, and a bed.

The room contained no exit. This was the tower room in the castle of the Marquis de Blois where Victorique was once imprisoned. The round floor floated in space, and a ladder stretching up from the distant world below was her one tenuous link to the outside. Three times a day, a young maid would deliver her tea, food, and a luxurious change of dress. Once a day, an old butler would come carrying a stack of new books. And that was all...

In her dream, the tiny Victorique, clad in a beautiful dress, was half her current size. She sat with her head bent over a book in her lap, reading by the light of a skylight high above her, a square hole cut from the sky.

I'm bored, I'm bored.... Bring me more books. More, more!

Fearful of the wrath of the Grey Wolf, the residents of the de Blois household delivered stacks of books to the top of the tower on a regular basis. There Victorique, a mere child of ten years old, would stamp her feet against the floor and let out a hoarse, haunting wail at a volume that shook the whole tower.

I'm bored. I'm bored.... Bring me something, anything that can release me from this eternal torment, this tedium. Go, bring it to me!

Every night, the members of the de Blois household trembled and kept a hushed silence whenever they heard that eerie, husky voice echoing from the tower....

“Achoo!”

After one of her loudest sneezes yet, the quilt squirmed again. Finally, a small golden head peeked out from the covers.

Even Victorique's glossy hair, which had always tumbled down her back like a turban come undone, now hung down in a bedraggled mess, making it hard to tell which side contained her face and which the back of her head. She sneezed again, swaying her hair, and only in that moment did her face become visible. Her normally rosy cheeks were bright red and puffy.

“U-ugh...” Victorique slid across the bed, groaning. “It ... hurts!” While panting hot breaths, she attempted to extend a trembling hand toward the bedside table. She parted her lips, which were just as red as her cheeks, and gasped, “I-I'm...”

And then, in her husky voice, she murmured as if still in the grips of her bad dream—no, her memories of the past....

“I’m, I’m ... *boored!*”

Victorique reached toward a stack of heavy books on the table. Through hazy eyes, she watched her small, uncertain hand tremble. At last, her hand grasped a book, and she shakily brought it toward herself. With a blissful smile on her flushed face, she began to turn the pages.

And then her face turned tearful.

“I ... read this one yesterday!”

She reached into the stack for another book, but...

“...Aaargh!”

Her vision too blurred to see, Victorique accidentally knocked down the stack of books. They thudded against the floor, scattering all over the carpet. In a panic, she tried to get out of bed, but didn’t have the strength. She stared at the floor and stretched out her trembling hand ... but she couldn’t quite reach all the way down.

“Ugh...” Victorique grimaced in frustration, then fell back into bed with a sigh. “Kujooou...” she groaned. “Pick them up... Pick up my books...”

Her face turned sad. “I ... am ... bored....” She sniffled. “Damn you, Kujou....” She groaned again. “You really are gone....” Her voice was small and lonely.

Victorique crawled back underneath the covers. All signs of life vanished from the small, luxurious bedroom, replaced only by stillness.

From the window came the faint sound of a little bird flapping its wings.

Cécile emerged from the garden maze in a hurry, carrying her class materials, textbooks, and notes with both hands. She briskly entered the gingerbread house and peered into the tiny bedroom, worry

creasing her brow. “How are y—oh, Miss Victorique!”

Victorique was curled up in the center of the large bed, panting heavily onto the pages of an opened book that she was stubbornly trying to read.

Cécile stared at her in alarm. “This won’t do. You need to rest.”

“Cécile, just in time.” Victorique rose unsteadily in bed, her face flushed. She pointed at the book, then launched into a monologue, occasionally pausing for breath. “I was just reading the memoir of a medieval monk. Achoo! He was still quite young when he wrote it; apparently, keeping a diary was a hobby of his. Now it remains as a record of daily life in that era.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hmph...” Victorique was momentarily thrown off by Cécile’s complete lack of interest, but she soon recovered and resumed speaking. “So, it all started the night this prominent bishop from the city was to arrive at this monastery in the mountains of Sauvure.”

“Ooh.”

“Hmph... According to this journal, a robbery happened to occur in the village on that all-important night. Some silverware was stolen from the home of a wealthy merchant, who saw the thief escape through his window.”

“Oh, dear. Silverware can be rather expensive.”

“Shut up and pay attention. And then, in another incident, a pig was stolen from a family of farmers. The villagers were at their wits’ end. How could something like this occur just as the bishop was paying a visit? They had wanted to show him how pious they were, but instead these terrible incidents happened. The villagers were enraged, and they quickly captured whom they assumed were the perpetrators of each crime.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Hmph! The one who stole the silverware was a drifter. They

believed that he had stolen them with the intent of selling them in another town. And they claimed that the one who stole the pig was an impoverished youth from a farmer family.”

“....”

“The villagers were mad with rage, and they decided to try the two for their crimes. The young monk describes that dark, dreadful night in vivid detail!”

“....”

“And at the very moment that they were about to hear their fate, the bishop arrived in town. And ... then ... h-hey! Cécile! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Cécile took the heavy book out of Victorique’s small hands. Victorique stared up at her in astonishment.

“If you’re sick, then you need to sleep. I’m confiscating this book.”

Victorique’s face crumpled tearfully. “H-how could you? I wasn’t finished yet, you fool!”

“I’m not a fool, I’m your teacher. Go on, get to sleep.”

Cécile lifted the book up to head height. Victorique grabbed at it furiously, but her arms were too short to reach. She bit her reddened lip in frustration. “I hate you!”

“And I hate sick people who won’t go to bed as they’re told.”

“If Kujou were here...” Victorique’s puffy cheeks puffed up even more than before. In a forlorn voice of longing, she whispered, “If Kujou were here, *he* would listen to me.”

Cécile chuckled. “That’s true. But I’m not Kujou, and I won’t listen to you. All right, pull up your covers, and close your eyes. And don’t move! Bye-bye for now, Miss Victorique.” She promptly left the room.

one

chapter three — the ones who vanished into the darkness

[1]

“What on earth is this all about, Kujou?”

The large brick building that housed the headquarters of the Sauvure police boasted a lavish façade and an elegant front entrance, but the interior was as plain and functional as could be. The sounds of busy footsteps echoed up and down the wide hallways.

In a spacious conference room on the fifth floor, Inspector Gréville de Blois was pontificating about something or other while toying with his golden drill and clutching a porcelain doll in a puffy, lacy dress to his side. Kazuya burst into the room, earning himself a glare of undisguised annoyance from the inspector. As he stood in the midst of a group of lantern-jawed men who appeared to be police detectives, Kazuya quietly explained the situation to him.

“So what?” de Blois murmured irritably, and turned the doll upside down and peeked under its dress. Scandalized, Kazuya looked at him askance.

“I wonder if she’s really wearing drawers,” the inspector muttered.

“Inspector! Listen to me!” Kazuya yelled. “There is a frightened girl over there who begged me to call the police. Something suspicious is clearly going on. It’s a case waiting to be solved!”

“....”

“Inspector!”

Inspector de Blois remained unmoved, and began to pull down the doll’s tiny pair of drawers.

At that moment, the door to the conference room opened, and a man walked in.

His shaggy hair and unfashionable suit spoke of one who truly cared nothing for fashion. It was difficult to tell his age—he could have been anywhere from his early twenties to his mid-forties. But behind his oddly-shaped square eyeglasses, Kazuya could see a startling brightness in his narrow eyes.

When the man walked in, Inspector de Blois quickly jumped to his feet, and roughly foisted the upside-down doll he had been holding by the leg onto Kazuya. Despite his surprise, Kazuya took the time to gravely clothe the half-nude doll properly in her drawers.

“Superintendent Signore!” announced one of the detectives. Apparently this man of ambiguous age was the superintendent of the Sauvure police, a Mr. Signore. He regarded the bizarrely-coiffed Inspector de Blois and the Asian boy next to him, who was putting underwear on a porcelain doll with the utmost solemnity.

“Gréville! Haven’t seen you in a while. You never come to visit. Aren’t you getting any of my invitations?”

“Well, I’ve just had a lot to do....”

Kazuya raised his eyebrows. The two of them seemed to be old acquaintances. But while Mr. Signore was speaking in a relaxed manner, for some reason the inspector kept his eyes averted the entire time.

Kazuya recalled that on the train the inspector had spoken of Mr. Signore as powerful, but not necessarily the most astute of men....

“By the way, Gréville, I’ve been hearing of your exploits since you began working for the police. I expect you’ll be a great asset with this art theft case. You know, Sauvrière has been in a fairly lawless state these days....”

“Oh? Rather different from the countryside.”

“Yes. Since the turn of the century, strange foreign customs and pagan cults from the colonies have gotten popular among the

common folk all over Europe. It's been on the wane since the Great War, but in Sauvrème, there are once again reports of evil deeds committed by devil worshipers lurking in the darkness. We have been working around the clock investigating these cases. ...But going by the rumors of your feats, lawlessness isn't something confined to the cities. Perhaps those are the times we live in. And yet you always manage to solve cases quickly and accurately. I hope you'll let us into your secrets."

Inspector de Blois gave a gratified nod.

Kazuya looked around the room. The other detectives were sitting on the edge of their seats, hanging onto every word of the two men's conversation. They evidently idolized the inspector.

Kazuya nudged him, and whispered in his ear, "Inspector, hurry!"

"Hurry? What for?" he whispered back.

"About Jeantan. I insist that you—"

"I'm busy right now."

"Then perhaps I should tell these gentlemen a little something about Victorique's wellspring of wisdom...."

The inspector shot out of his chair, dragged Kazuya away to a corner of the hallway, and cursed at him in a low voice. Undaunted, Kazuya whispered retorts back at him. The two of them argued for a short time, but soon enough, the inspector gave in.

"...Fine. We'll adjourn the meeting and head over to Jeantan."

Mr. Signore and the detectives watched the inspector forcibly pull Kazuya out of the room, then turned to gaze curiously at the porcelain doll left on the table...

Kazuya, Inspector de Blois, and two policemen arrived by carriage in front of a huge octagonal brick building—the department store Jeantan. They pushed aside the deferential doorman standing at the

ready, and went through the glass doors.

Purple-uniformed employees of various nationalities stood all over the floor. In a single unified motion, they turned to look at the uninvited guests, as if a flock of birds sitting on the branches of a tree had been startled by some sound and turned their heads around all at once. Every face was as impassive as a mask.

The sight of them threw the inspector off balance, and he halted. But he soon pulled himself together, and turned to Kazuya. “Kujou...?”

Kazuya nodded, and looked over the faces of the attendants. Spotting a young man with a beautiful Nordic face, he pointed at him. “First, I asked this person where to buy the Blue Rose paperweight.”

The young man gave him a puzzled look, as if he had not quite understood what he had heard. “This is the first time I see you, sir.”

He spoke broken French in a Scandinavian accent that Kazuya remembered distinctly. Kazuya stared back at him, equally confused. “Huh? But it was just earlier today. I asked you where I could buy a Blue Rose.”

“That cannot be. I do not remember your face,” the man repeated.

Kazuya froze uncertainly.

“What seems to be the problem?” a deep voice boomed out.

Kazuya turned around, and saw another face he recognized. It was a man in his mid-thirties, an imposing figure with a tanned, muscular body clad in an expensive suit—the same man who had yelled at him in the room with the glass cases at the very top floor.

“My name is Garnier. I’m the owner of this store. Is there something the matter, sir?”

Kazuya also recognized the name Garnier. He was a young businessman who had made a fortune after the Great War ended, and a few years ago had purchased Jeantan, an established

department store.

“Excuse me, we met earlier at the top. Actually, after that—”

“...What are you talking about?” Garnier again looked at him curiously. Kazuya gulped.

Young purple-uniformed employees were beginning to amass behind Garnier, their faces showing identical looks of puzzlement. They were slowly closing in on Kazuya. Every face was expressionless, and yet this was a truly unsettling lack of expression, one that seemed to convey a kind of unspeakable malevolence.

Kazuya began to feel flustered. “There’s a room on the top floor with a door made of oak. It was full of glass cases!”

Mr. Garnier tilted his head, gazing at Kazuya with a genuinely mystified look. Then he turned to Inspector de Blois, and asked with a face full of bafflement, “What on earth is this Oriental boy talking about?”

“Uh, well...” The inspector stuttered for a moment, then gave Kazuya a nudge. “Do something!”

An eerie silence settled over the floor. The purple-uniformed salespeople were surrounding Kazuya, the inspector, and the two police officers, tightening the circle little by little.

Garnier smiled and said to Kazuya, “Customers aren’t supposed to go in that room.”

“I went inside by mistake. I was following the directions from that clerk right over there.”

Garnier looked back at the young man with the Scandinavian accent, but the youth only shook his head.

“But I clearly remember—”

“Then what was in that room?”

“Well...”

“If you went in, then you must be able to describe it!” Mr. Garnier suddenly raised his voice.

Kazuya briefly flinched, but replied without backing down. “Then I’ll describe it for you. Let’s see... The door was made of oak. The room was full of glass cases. The wallpaper was brown, and there was a black and white checkered tile floor. And a chandelier with a floral motif!”

Kazuya turned toward Inspector de Blois. “Inspector, why don’t we go see that room? When we do, you’ll know what I saw was real. And then we can move onto the other reason we’re here!”

The inspector reluctantly nodded, and made a signal toward the two policemen.

A slight trace of unease crossed Garnier’s expression.

The inspector, Kazuya, and the two policemen took the elevator to the top floor. Garnier and three young assistants rode with them.

They exited the elevator and walked down a long white corridor lined with glass doors. At the very back of the corridor, there was one room that had a door made of oak. They entered the room.

“Inspector, I started out by going in this room. And then—” Kazuya halted in his tracks.

What he saw was...

...a completely different room from the one he had entered just a short time ago.

The wallpaper should have been an understated brown, but instead it had changed to a golden color printed with a garish pattern in decidedly poor taste. A luridly bright red carpet lined the floor, and even the chandelier no longer resembled a flower, but had been replaced with an eye-catching golden fixture. Only the glass cases

were how he remembered them, but the items inside were also subtly different.

Inspector de Blois turned to him, suspicion written all over his face. “Where’s the brown wallpaper, the checkered floor, and the floral chandelier, Kujou?”

“B-but I saw them!” Kazuya yelled. “I was just in here an hour ago! And I saw you, Mr. Garnier. I dropped the plate, the paperweight, and the comb, and I apologized to you. Don’t you remember?”

Garnier shook his head, a cold expression on his face.

At first, Kazuya was unable to move. Then he grabbed the inspector and ran down the corridor.

Garnier and his entourage followed them, grinning widely. “What is this fuss all about...?”

Kazuya found the service elevator in the same place as he remembered it. That ominous elevator, permeated with reddish stains and a strange smell....

He exited on the first floor, and walked down that eerie hallway with the pale gas lamps he had passed through earlier that day. When he arrived at the pile of mannequins, he looked back at the inspector, and opened the lid of the wooden box.

“There was a girl in here. She had sandy hair, and kept saying that devils were here!”

Inspector de Blois snorted and shook his head, rolling his eyes at Kazuya. “Kujou...”

Kazuya looked down into the box. And then he raised his voice in a cry of despair.

Inside was...

A body curled up into the fetal position.

Its neck twisted at an unnatural angle.

Open dark eyes filled with resentment, staring out into space.

Sandy hair.

It was a mannequin.

“B-but...” Kazuya slumped down to the floor. The vibration rocked the box, and the mannequin’s head snapped off with an unimaginably loud crack and tumbled into his lap. He shrieked at the uncomfortably heavy, life-like sensation.

Unable to hold back any longer, Garnier burst out laughing. “Bwa, ha, ha, ha! Bwa, ha, ha, ha!”

The three young attendants joined in, their laughter matching his.

“Bwa, ha, ha, ha! Bwa, ha, ha, ha!”

“Bwa, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, that’s so funny! Bwa, ha, ha, ha!”

Kazuya, roiled by a mixture of mortification and bewilderment, gazed dazedly up at their faces, the mannequin’s head still in his lap.

Standing next to him, Inspector de Blois again rolled his eyes. “Are you telling me that you confused a mannequin for a living person?”

“N-no...” Kazuya groaned.

The inspector roughly yanked the mannequin’s hair and lifted it up to examine carefully. “There’s no refinement in these mass-produced ones....” He threw it to the side. The head rolled on the floor until it hit the wall with a loud rattle, then stopped. The wide-open eyes stared out empty.

No one said a word.

Finally, Garnier heaved a sigh of dismay. “Is that all you have for us?”

“Yes, sir, I am truly sorry about this. If you would excuse us...” The inspector unceremoniously grabbed Kazuya, who was motionless in shock, and began to pull him out of the room.

Kazuya snapped out of his trance. “But inspector, I’m telling the truth! That room had brown wallpaper and a checkered tile floor, and there was a real, live girl inside this box! Inspector!”

At this, Garnier turned around, and his tolerant smile turned wrathful in an instant. “That’s enough!” he roared in anger. “If you insist on further insulting my business, then I’ll have you arrested! Get this through your head, boy. You were never here. No one remembers you!”

“That’s not true! I-I swear I came here!” Kazuya glared back at Garnier.

The inspector and the two policemen dragged Kazuya out of the building.

When they came out, a familiar coachman happened to be loading a passenger outside at that very moment. A large jagged scar ran diagonally from right to left across the coachman’s face. He made eye contact with Kazuya, but quickly looked away. Kazuya whistled, but the man acted as if he hadn’t heard him.

Kazuya shook off the inspector, ran down the sidewalk, and jumped in front of the carriage. The horses neighed, and the coachman pulled on the reins to bring the coach to a stop. He scowled in irritation, cursing under his breath.

Kazuya ran up to him. “Excuse me! Didn’t you give me a ride earlier? Inspector, inspector! He doesn’t work at Jeantan; he should be able to talk to us!”

Kazuya looked back at the inspector’s dubious face, then turned to the coachman. “You gave me a ride earlier, didn’t you?”

The coachman hesitated, then gazed deeply into Kazuya’s face and nodded.

Kazuya was filled with relief. “You picked me up at Jeantan, and

took me to the police headquarters.”

The coachman eyed him warily. “What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“This wasn’t where I picked you up.”

“What?!” Kazuya’s face twisted in anguish.

The coachman looked down at him, a peculiar smile on his face. The scar on his face twitched and transformed into a ghoulish grin. Then he said, “I picked you up at Charles de Gilet Station, and dropped you off in front of the palace square. What’s the matter with you?”

two

The coachman spared one more glance at Kazuya, who was standing frozen in shock. Then he shrugged, cracked his whip at his horse, and rode away.

Kazuya stood stupefied in the street, watching the carriage as it left.

Then he felt a hand clap his shoulder. He turned his head, and saw the inspector giving him a weary look.

“But it’s true, inspector. I really did—”

“I’m going back to the station now, Kujou.”

“Inspector...”

“Will you give it a rest already?” The inspector hailed another carriage. Then his expression turned stern. “Not only do we have no evidence for your claims, we have testimony that conflicts with them in every way. And you’re up against Garnier, a heavyweight in the business world. He may not be a nobleman, but he’s still one of the most powerful men in Sauvrière as it transitions into a financial center. He’s not someone you can disrespect based on a mere hunch.”

“But...”

“Besides...” The inspector bit down hard on his lip. “I have to one-up the superintendent ... Mr. Signore, by any means necessary. I don’t have the luxury to get involved with things like this. I want to earn a name for myself in Sauvrière, Kujou. Now, please don’t waste any more of my precious time.”

Kazuya stubbornly held his ground. “But I’m absolutely sure that I saw a real girl who needed our help!”

“...Kujou, you were daydreaming. You know I’m right, don’t you?”

“But...” Kazuya groaned. He had no idea what was going on, and wanted nothing more than to write everything off as a bad dream and forget about it.

But the terror in that strange girl’s jewel-like violet eyes, as she grasped his hand and cried “Devils!” over and over again, refused to leave his mind.

Kazuya had never seen the look on her face on anyone else before. That was genuine fear. If that girl existed in the real world rather than as a specter in a daydream, then something truly terrible could be happening to her. Should he really just forget about it?

His conscientious nature reared its head and refused to let him forget things as they were. But he didn’t know what to do. There was not a single person who would validate his memories, and both the room with the glass cases and the girl in the box were nothing like how he remembered them.

“Just carry on with your shopping,” said the inspector with a cynical smile. He left in the carriage with the policemen.

Horse-drawn carriages filled the street with the pounding of hooves on the worn cobblestones. The glass windows lining the street cast shimmers of light on the cobblestones, reflections of the intense noontime sun. Just standing outdoors was enough to make Kazuya sweat. Under the early summer sunlight, the vividness of the nightmarish events that he had experienced felt further from reality than ever.

Kazuya watched one vehicle after another head down the street. Trotting horses, the clamoring voices of the people of Sauvrière, and the bugles of the soldiers stationed in the palace square enveloped him in sound.

“It ate my daughter! It ate her!”

Someone roughly yanked on the hem of his trousers, startling Kazuya out of his reverie, and he turned around.

An old woman dressed in rags was looking up at him. The hand that gripped his clothing was trembling visibly. "The darkness ate her!" she cried out.

As Kazuya hesitated, a small grubby hand reached out from behind and yanked him back with startling force, pulling him away from the wailing old woman and into a shadowy section of drain pipe.

He heard a low voice in his ear. "Gimme paper."

In the dim light, two small dark eyes gleamed like blue will-o'-the-wisps amidst a face blackened with soot and grime, surrounded by disheveled hair whose original color was obscured by filth. It was the beggar boy whom Kazuya had met earlier.

"I rescued you from the old lady. So gimme some paper."

"No, I won't. And while we're at it, give me back the paper from before," snapped Kazuya.

The boy snorted, and gave him a sidelong look. "You Chinamen sure are tightwads."

"It might be hard to tell the difference, but I'm not a Chinaman."

"Huh, really," the boy said without much interest. He screwed up his face and gazed out into the street for a few moments. "So you're not giving me any paper."

"Nope."

"Tch ... Forget it. There's something else I wanna ask you. What were you doing going to Jeantan over and over?"

At first, Kazuya didn't think he had heard correctly. Then he gasped, and looked at the boy's face. He wasn't expecting the boy's reaction, which was to tense his body and shield his small messy-haired head with his thin arms.

"Did you just say I went to Jeantan over and over?"

The boy cautiously peeked between his raised arms at Kazuya's

serious expression, and frowned warily. “What are you talking about? Don’t you know that already?”

“That’s not what I mean. I do know that.”

“Because I saw you...” The boy pointed at the clock tower in the square. Then his eyes fell half-closed and his mouth opened widely. Intoning his words strangely as if he were being manipulated by some unseen force, he began to speak in a startlingly rapid-fire cadence.

“You entered Jeantan at 11:22! You ran out at 11:46, and jumped into a carriage! You returned at 12:09! You went inside with a nobleman with a weird thing on his head and two policemen! And you left at exactly 12:30!”

“That’s a fine memory you have,” Kazuya muttered, not bothering to disguise his skepticism.

The boy exhaled heavily and turned away.

“But you’re right. I did come to Jeantan. No doubt about it. But for some reason, everyone there said that they’d never seen me before. Even the coachman said he never gave me a ride....”

The boy’s cheeks contorted—apparently, this was his version of a smile. “You really are dumb. They’ll lie as much as they want if there’s money in it for them. If someone from Jeantan gave me some paper, then even I’d say that I never saw you. That coachman must’ve gotten a lot of money from them.”

Kazuya fell silent for a moment. “But ... the room I saw when I went the first time looked completely different. The walls, the chandelier, the floor... That’s why they told me that I must have been daydreaming.”

“...Gimme some paper.”

Kazuya was ready to argue, but instead reluctantly took out his wallet and handed him a single bill.

The boy’s lips twitched, and he swiftly hid the bill somewhere on

his person. His eyes went half-lidded again and he fell deep into thought. Then he spoke again, resuming his strange cadence. "11:50! Several men went in through the back door, carrying loads of stuff!"

"...Stuff?"

"Paint cans and brushes ... and a big bundle of gold-colored paper! And a rolled-up carpet! They wore overalls covered in splotches of paint!"

"Must be painters."

"They came out at 12:04! No longer carrying the golden paper or the carpet! They got away in a carriage!"

"Golden paper ... I guess that's wallpaper. If they weren't carrying it when they came out, then they must have used it up in Jeantan. I suppose in that room where the wallpaper changed from brown to gold."

The boy opened his eyes and yawned. "At 12:04, that leaves only five minutes before you came back."

"Yeah. I'm sure they papered the walls and installed the carpet in a hurry after I left. They could've used any one of the chandeliers they had for sale. But still..." Kazuya shrugged. "That's only if what you say is true. After all, how could you possibly remember all that in such exact detail?" Kazuya stared at him, unable to decide whether he believed him or not.

The boy opened his small eyes and glared at Kazuya. His cheeks quivered in injured pride. "I'm not lying. I was watching everything from the street the whole time. I've seen all sorts of things before. But no one believes someone like me. I guess you don't believe me, either."

"It's not that, but just..."

"I was here the whole time, noticing all sorts of things. I even remember all the customers who go into Jeantan. See that lady?" He pointed at a woman who was coming out of Jeantan with a

heavy load of purple shopping bags. “She went in two hours ago, and just got out now. She bought lots of stuff. She’s got five bags with her. And that old man who just came out...” He pointed at an old man who was striding out of the store. “He was only inside for three minutes. I know what he bought, too. A walking stick. It’s not in a bag, but he didn’t have it with him when he went in. He must have had them take the price tag off and skip the bag so he could use it right away. See, I’m here every day, watching who goes in and out of Jeantan.”

“I understand that, but all I’m trying to say is—”

“Every month, there’s two or three people who don’t come back out.”

“It’s just that there’s no way anyone could—huh? What do you mean they don’t come back out?”

The boy grimaced, and shivered fearfully. “They go in, and they don’t come back out, not from the front door or the back. Days go by, and they still don’t come out. Some people disappear inside Jeantan. Always young women.”

“If that’s true, then shouldn’t you tell this to the police?”

The boy bared his yellow teeth. “I told them,” he angrily spat out. “That a woman disappeared. And they just hit me. They thought I was some lying kid. They hit me over and over, and chased me away. The policemen said the same thing as you. That there’s no way I could remember it so exactly. That I’m a liar. ...So now I don’t say anything. I just watch. Just stand here and watch.”

Kazuya gazed carefully at the boy. He couldn’t even remember precisely when he himself had entered or exited Jeantan. Being able to remember everyone who went in and out of Jeantan shouldn’t be possible....

But he realized that the boy’s words also had a strange ring of truth to them. Earlier, there had been an old woman who pointed at Jeantan and said that it “ate her daughter.” What if that meant that her daughter was one of those who had entered the store and never

come out again?

And that girl Kazuya had found bizarrely stuffed into a box, screaming...

Oh! Now he remembered something.

When Kazuya had met the boy for the first time, he had heard him mutter “nine fifty-seven.” At the time, he hadn’t understood what that meant. But now as he thought back to it, the boy had said that at the same time that the contents of his wallet fell to the ground.

It seems impossible, but what if...

Kazuya quietly pulled out his wallet and began to count the change inside. After that incident, he had given some money to the boy and to the coachman, but only in paper bills. As for coins, the amount added up to...

Exactly nine-hundred and fifty-seven.

Incredible! Kazuya looked at the boy with new eyes. But this fearsomely intelligent little beggar was holding both arms over his head to protect from blows, and the muscles in his grimy face were tense.

“Hey,” began Kazuya, pushing aside his confusion. A moment later...

“Give me back my daughter!”

Out of nowhere the old woman reappeared, and again grabbed onto Kazuya, while glaring at him with black eyes glittering like an animal’s in her filthy, blackened face. She grabbed the lapel of his coat with tremendous force and shouted in a foreign accent, “Find my daughter!”

“Excuse me, uh ... Let go of me, please!” Kazuya yelled, and the woman quickly retreated.

Then she looked up at him fearfully, tears gathering in her eyes. "Help me find my daughter..." Her voice grew faint, and her head drooped. Like the wind clearing away fog to make way for the sun, the madness left her eyes, and composure and rationality returned. "She vanished here four years ago. We were tourists. We visited that department store. But, but ... she never came out again!"

"She never came out...?"

"She wanted to buy a dress, so I told her I would buy one for her. She took it and went inside the dressing room by herself. I waited and waited, but she didn't come back out, and when I opened the door, she wasn't there ... no one was there, no one." The old woman began to sob.

Kazuya immediately recalled the ghost stories that his classmate Avril had told him. Among them was a tale that bore a striking resemblance to this case—the story of a lady who had vanished from a department store dressing room. The old woman's story was very similar to the one in that book, which seemed to have been compiled based on rumors circulating in Sauvrière.

And the case that Inspector de Blois mentioned of "the ones who vanished in the darkness"...

What if, every now and then, visitors really were going missing in Jeantan, but this fact had not yet come to light, and only circulated as a dubious rumor among the townspeople...?

Tears ran down the old woman's wrinkled face, weaving hideous patterns in the caked grime. Her eyelids, lined with creases, drooped over her eyes. Something large swelled under her ragged clothes.

Kazuya thought of another story that Avril had told him. A murderer dressed as a vagrant had strung the bodies of dead children under her clothes...

The old woman cried out to Kazuya, interrupting his musings. "All of the employees acted strangely! They said they had never seen my daughter before. Even the attendant who had shown my daughter

the dress said that I had come into the store alone. The doorman said the same. All of them said they had never seen my daughter. Even though I remember them showing my daughter the dress, saying how it suited her, and leading her into the dressing room! No one listened to me. She disappeared ... just like that.... It's already been four years. She must be dead by now!"

Kazuya thought back to the second time he had gone to Jeantan. Everyone insisted that they had never seen him before, and the room that he had been inside looked completely different. And then he had seen that girl come out of the box to beg for his help. He was sure of what he had witnessed.

Kazuya agonized over his thoughts for a long while, then opened his eyes.

He felt himself tightly gripping something in his hand. He looked down, and saw a box wrapped with a red ribbon. The box contained a pipe-stand, exquisitely shaped into a slipper, which he had bought as soon as he arrived in Sauvrème—his present for Victorique.

His thoughts turned to her. *I'm positive that I wasn't daydreaming. If Victorique were here, she would solve the mystery in an instant, then yawn and complain that she was bored again. I know she would. Victorique, if only you were here...*

Her husky voice played back in his head. *It all stems from desire, you see!*

The barest glimmer of hope returned to Kazuya's eyes.

A scene floated up in his mind: his friend, in the silent conservatory at the very top of the library, expounding on the boom in ghost stories—the sight of her face, so small and strange, and yet so brilliant above all; and the sound of the words she spoke in that husky voice of an old woman...

That most basic human desire—to be one with the unseeable and unknowable. Some seek it in religion. Because no one has ever seen God.

Some seek it in romance. Because love is also intangible. And now others have begun to seek it in ghost stories....

She had scoffed at him when he claimed that he would never believe in the supernatural. *Whenever something happens that can't be explained, people like you are always the first ones to cave in.*

Kazuya nodded in determination. A relieved smile rose unbidden to his lips. *Oh, Victorique ... cruel, fickle, arrogant Victorique, who infuriates me so. I know you would believe me, and listen to what I have to say. Of course, you'd also get grumpy and mock me and hurl all sorts of insults, but you would still find out the truth for me. There's no way everything that's happened can be just a daydream. These are all fragments. It might be a headache of a mystery for me, but for Victorique, they're all fragments of chaos. She would reconstruct them on the spot, a mere trifle for a captive princess to pass the time away when she's dying of boredom! Besides, Victorique was throwing such a tantrum at me yesterday...*

In the conservatory at the top of the library, Victorique was flailing around her little hands and feet like a petulant child, and said this:

I give you until tomorrow to get mixed up into some strange case, even if you have to die in the process.

There is nothing to fear. If I'm in the mood, then I'll solve it for you quickly enough.

...If she was in the mood. That line made Kazuya slightly worried—no, make that very worried, but it was the only option that came to mind. And so he decided to head toward a café across the street from Jeantan.

The strange beggar boy scurried after him.

The informal sidewalk café was bustling with lunchtime customers. Kazuya asked a waiter if he could use the telephone, and was cheerfully handed the phone at the front of the store.

Kazuya took the receiver, and asked the operator to connect him to St. Marguerite's School.

Next he heard Cécile's carefree voice over the line. "Kujou, did you find the Blue Rose?"

Kazuya replied distractedly, "Not right now, Miss Cécile. Let me speak to Victorique, please!"

"Did you get a hankering to hear her voice?"

"...That sounds very creepy, and I would prefer you not say such things. No, this is an emergency—"

"Suuure, an emergency. I'll just tell Miss Victorique that you were hankering to hear her voice, so you made up an emergency just so you'd have an excuse to call her all the way from Sauvrème...."

"Absolutely not! Wait, Miss Cécile? You better not say that!"

But Cécile only giggled, ignoring Kazuya's cries, and set the phone down. Kazuya buried his head in his hands, fretting over the possibility that perhaps she wasn't kidding, and she really was going to tell Victorique that.

Because he had no doubt that Victorique herself would never feel lonely or want to hear his voice no matter how far away he was. Far from it; she probably wouldn't even notice that he was gone. Even if he stayed away from school for a week, or a month, she would just bury herself in a hill of books in the conservatory, smoking her pipe, never sparing him a moment's thought until the day he came back, and then all she would say to him would be, *Oh, you again*, unable to motivate herself to give him more than a single bored glance.

Tch! These thoughts were making Kazuya feel lonely. And oddly infuriated. An endless litany of Victorique's faults ran through his mind. *Pigheaded, arrogant Victorique! Scrawny, crybaby, captive Victorique...*

Somehow, it only made him feel worse.

Victorique still hadn't come to the phone.

The early summer's dazzling sunlight shone in through the front of

the café, reflected by the white cobblestones on the street...

bedroom three

It was a dark, cramped place, uncomfortably humid from Victorique's trapped exhalations. Her fever had steadily risen, leaving her on the edge of consciousness. She closed her eyes and hissed out hot, panting breaths in the darkness. Her awareness was growing dimmer. Clutching the edge of the down quilt with her little hands, she slowly opened her green eyes and groaned. But a fierce light still lingered in those eyes, defiant against her weakness.

Victorique moaned softly. "I'm never ... coming out!"

A dismayed sigh came from outside of the darkness—someone had heard her.

Cécile walked through the garden maze and arrived at Victorique's bedroom. "Excuse me, Miss Victorique, there's someone on the telephone for—oh, excuse me, doctor." She halted inside the bedroom, her eyes darting restlessly.

A wizened man wearing a white coat and a flummoxed look on his face was standing in the corner of the room. His square leather bag sat open on the bedside table. He stared back at her, a large translucent syringe still gripped in his hand.

Cécile turned to look at the bed. Victorique was nowhere to be seen. But there was a lump in the middle of the covers, and it was quivering ever so slightly. When she imagined what was underneath, she had to laugh. "Oh, dear..."

"Cécile, as soon as I mentioned the word 'injection,' this happened." The elderly village doctor in the white coat gave Cécile a pained look, clearly at his wits' end.

Then a hoarse voice came from the center of the bulging covers, punctuated by ragged gasps for air. "I hate pain! ...Achoo!"

“It works because it’s painful, Miss Victorique.”

“You’re lying to me.”

“...I am not lying.”

There was no answer.

“Miss Victorique!”

Cécile still met with no response. She had tried to raise her voice, but with her round glasses and countenance reminiscent of a chubby puppy, she couldn’t quite project enough authority. Meanwhile, the lump underneath the covers showed no signs of budging.

The doctor shrugged. “If we try to pull the covers back, she’ll probably unleash a scream the likes of which the world has never heard before. Cécile, this little runt must be one of your students. Do something!”

“B-but what...?” Frowning, Cécile pondered to herself.

Silence filled the bedroom. Other than an occasional sneeze from the covers, there was no other sound.

The French windows creaked softly in the wind. Tree leaves glistened under the summer sun.

“Oh!” Cécile clapped her hands, and pointed at the neighboring room. “How could I forget? Miss Victorique, you have a telephone call from your friend.”

“...You’re lying.”

“Wh-what makes you say that?”

“I don’t have any friends,” Victorique murmured, a faint melancholy coloring her voice.

“Then who is Kujou?”

Inch by inch, the quilt slowly started to move. The lump grew...
...then stopped.

Cécile silently winked at the doctor.

“...Kujou?” A slight hint of joy seemed to enter Victorique’s voice.

“He called from Sauvrière. He sounded rather frantic.”

“Hmph...”

Cécile clenched her hands, and gave Victorique another verbal nudge. “He kept shouting that it was an emergency. If you don’t hurry, he might hang up.”

“Hmph...” The quilt wriggled some more. “Damn that Kujou... A thickheaded man as usual. I’m sure—” she coughed, “—he’s been doing foolish things with that foolish face of his and gotten himself involved in some foolish incident in Sauvrière,” Victorique said, raising her voice with a touch of glee. She sat up in bed, coughing.

Cécile and the doctor both stared at her in amazement. With her body still entirely hidden under the covers, Victorique slowly began to move like a ghost possessing the down quilt. She carefully stood up and walked toward the next room.

Cécile exchanged a look with the doctor, and gave him a nod.

And then she furtively stuck out her leg.

Victorique stumbled over Cécile’s leg and fell to the floor, releasing a loud series of sneezes as she tripped.

“Now!” yelled Cécile.

Victorique’s little head emerged from the blanket, her face contorted in pain. As she slowly looked over her shoulder, her green eyes widened in disbelief.

Someone had grabbed her thin arm when the blanket had slipped away at the moment of her fall. It was the doctor, wearing a

triumphant smile. He plunged the syringe into her arm.

Victorique's face crumpled. Droplets of tears spilled like pearls from the corners of her eyes. "Ugh...?"

She drew in a large gulp of air, then let loose a wretched, disconsolate scream the likes of which the world had never heard before.

"You'll regret this. Damn you, Cécile. Damn that doctor. How's this supposed to lower a fever? It hurts. It hurts..." Sobbing and sneezing, Victorique hobbled to the next room.

The doctor picked up his medical bag and sauntered away in satisfaction. Cécile announced in between her giggles that she had another class period to teach, and left the cottage.

Now alone, Victorique got up again, rubbing her arm where a tingling pain remained from the injection. At last, she reached the other room, and stood in front of the phone, wiping away her tears again and again with the back of her hand, bawling like a child. Shoulders heaving, she reached for the receiver, and shakily brought it to her ear with her small hand...

And heard Kazuya's voice crying out frantically.

"Victorique? Are you there? Victorique! Look, I'm in big trouble. Stay calm and listen to me. Hello? Can you hear me? Victorique!"

"...Idiot!" Victorique spat. She listened as Kazuya was rendered briefly speechless, which was soon followed by an outpouring of his vehement rage.

But next came a roar like rushing wind, and what sounded like something crashing into the phone. Then she heard the unfamiliar voice of a child intone, "Twelve o'clock..."

Kazuya screamed.

Click!

The strange cry reverberated, and the line suddenly went dead.

Dumbfounded, Victorique stared at the phone, and at last her cheeks swelled up. She was angry.

“What on earth do you want from me, Kujou?! Do you realize just how much I sacrificed in order to come here?! Because of you, I was subjected to a very painful injection, and yet I still came out to answer your call! Ugh...”

Victorique’s shoulders fell sadly, and she shuffled back to the bedroom. She picked up the fallen quilt from the floor with a trembling hand. It was light and fluffy, but she struggled to heft it back onto the bed as if it were very heavy.

She exhaled heavily. With her face redder than ever, and her breathing hot, she collapsed onto the bed.

Finally, Victorique’s labored breaths settled into the calm and even rhythm of sleep.

And the bedroom was once more filled only with silence...